

“Mission belongs to the essence of the church”

By Michaela Koller, March 11, 2021, *Die Tagespost*



Thomas Schirmacher in conversation with Pope Francis at the 2015 Synod on the Family © Thomas Schirmacher

The new Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, Bishop Thomas Schirmacher, talks in an interview with the „Tagespost“ about his ecumenical relationship with Pope Francis, about Christian mission and how he met persecuted Christians as a child.

You published the book “Coffee Breaks with the Pope” in 2017. How does Pope Francis prefer his coffee?

In the breakfast room and also during breaks, I have observed that he drinks black coffee.

And you yourself?

I drink it with milk and sweetener.

Beyond coffee habits and denomination, there are nevertheless unifying factors. In 2013, you rejoiced at the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as head of the Catholic Church. What was known about his ecumenism at that time?

In contrast to Brazil, where one cannot exactly speak of a good relationship between the Christian confessions, it was known about Argentina that the whole atmosphere between our friends and the Catholic Church there, which he helped to shape considerably, was



positive. This began with listening to the other person in the original and appreciating him in principle. There was the story of his mother teaching him decency toward a Salvation Army officer and explaining all the good they do there. When big evangelistic events took place, he showed up there even without an invitation to pray at the opening. From the beginning, it was clear that he is a relationship person. Experience shows: When there are personal relationships at the highest level, it is possible to talk about theologically contentious issues as well. Pope Francis said early on that the word sect would be removed for fellow Christians. This allowed us to sort out what are really contentious issues and what are just silly rumors about each other.

How alive is ecumenism at the top level now? How is cooperation taking shape?

It has actually gone on positively as expected. In the presence of high-ranking Catholic representatives, ecumenical relations always were very formal. Since Francis has been pope, it is no longer decisive with which level of the hierarchy one talks. While I think highly of Pope Benedict XVI as well, it was a more formal approach back then. It meant that you could only talk to someone in the Vatican whose rank was at the same level. Francis, after all, has changed that at the Vatican. If he needs an expertise from us, then we can send the expert in question ourselves. But there are also topics where we would have liked to see more intensive work. That is the case with the issue of the persecution of Christians.

You have already left your mark as Associate Secretary General, as a member of the Religious Freedom Commission and as head of the Theological Commission. For example, the fruitful cooperation is also based on the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” which the major Christian churches adopted in the summer of 2011. How did this come about?

The process began in 2006 when the Vatican, together with the World Council of Churches, wanted to draft a statement with representatives of other religions on peaceful mission. The increase in anti-conversion laws in many countries gave rise to this. I was brought in by the World Council of Churches as an expert, but saw very quickly that in doing so, those who do not do mission would make a statement about what those who do mission should do, and in turn they would see that as an attack. I suggested at that time that we bring in those who are actually responsible for mission, including the World Evangelical Alliance, and have them explain what they mean by dialogue and peaceful cooperation. I was of the opinion that we Christians should work this out among ourselves first.

In this way, we were able to prove that we are capable of making a statement about this with substance. At the beginning, we thought it would never be implemented. But as time went on, I realized that Pope Benedict is also on the side of the WEA. The World Council of Churches in Geneva approved it only very shortly before it was published. The bases on which we agreed were always biblical. The basic argument at the beginning is: mission is part of the essence of the church. Jesus gave us that. But mission must be done in the spirit and according to the commandment of Jesus, such as that of charity. In the end, Pope Benedict only wanted to change one word in our draft and crossed out three printing errors with his small handwriting. That was all. (He laughs).

Often in the past, parts of the World Evangelical Alliance network have been portrayed as a disruptive factor in interreligious dialogue. Where do you think this prejudice comes from?

Until the document on “[Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World](#)”, there have been serious disputes between the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance about the relationship between dialogue and mission. The WEA has never understood dialogue to mean cutting back on mission. As a result, they have taken some appeals for dialogue as doing less mission. The attitude of finding any kind of dialogue suspect dominated.

I know you as the president of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights (IGFM). How does a Reformed theologian and religious scholar come to the topics of religious freedom, human trafficking and slavery, for which you are in demand internationally as an expert?

My parents have been on the board of an international missionary organization all their lives. When new missionaries came, a courtesy visit to us was always part of the process. They were usually younger couples, but also older, experienced ones like the preacher Billy Graham. As a child, I first came into conscious contact with the subject of persecution of Christians when we had Festo Kivengere, the Anglican archbishop from Uganda, as our guest in our home. He was persecuted by Idi Amin, then wrote the book “I Love Idi Amin.” That also inoculated me early on against racism, because my parents held such guests in high esteem. I really imbibed respect for other cultures with my mother’s milk. I later lived for a long time in two worlds: a career as a theology professor and, at the same time, a secular career in sociology and comparative religion, through which I came to the field of human rights through the specialty of ethnic minorities. It was brought together since I started to deal with persecuted Christians during my studies. That actually gave birth to all my ecumenical work.

You unflinchingly raised persecution of Christians with the Grand Imam of Badshahi Mosque in the Pakistani city of Lahore, Maulana Abdul Khabir Azad, in 2017. You went to see him with human rights lawyer Aneeqa Anthony. Did you feel understood?

I think that the thanks for protecting Christians in Lahore was fully received. I later learned that this story was passed on among Muslims and that he stood by it when the issue came up only among Muslims. After all, he was considered a brave man among them as a result. I believe that the relationship changes when we thank Muslims for help. However, this only concerns the big picture, not the fate of individuals affected by violations of religious freedom.

We were able to follow a special Islamic-Christian meeting in Iraq just this weekend. Prime Minister Al-Kasimi declared in Baghdad that in the future March 6 would be a holiday as the National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence. What hopes does this raise on the Christian side?

Again, this only concerns the big picture. It reminds the majority that Christians are also human beings. You can't condemn them quite so easily now because you talk nicely to each other. If you were to ask the Christians there, they would certainly have wanted something that directly intervenes in their situation. They can hardly refer to anything through this.

Will you do anything differently as secretary general than you did in the position before?

I am now responsible for the budget and the appointment of staff in several hundred offices. Thanks to the support of deputies, I have the opportunity to focus on external relations and special problems. These are tasks that are not much different than before.