How humankind is one

″Humani generis unitas″: the Catholic teaching for the third millennium

"We distinguish races and nations;
but for God the whole world is the one house of all."
Minucius Felix, early third century

The world community needs a central, powerful image of renewal if civilisation is to be given the new direction it needs: ″One human family″. The following contribution sets out the core concern of a detailed group project which first appeared in a collected volume of the German section of ‘pax christi, the international Catholic peace movement’, in September 2015.[1]

1. With his encyclical *"Laudato si"* (LS) Francis, Bishop of Rome, wishes to address ″every person living on this planet″. In it, the ″unity of the human race″ is not the subject of doctrinal teaching but a question of the emergency facing the entire inhabited planet Earth. The challenge is ″to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development″ (LS 13). "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.″ (LS 52) Civilisation′s aggressive ″Money – Power – War″ programme is choking the future for the generations coming after us. It is spreading sadness and fatalism. A move in the opposite direction is a move towards the collaboration, on an equal footing, of all continents, regions, cultures, world-view communities and religions. It needs a strong symbol which can release positive energies. Here is where the Catholic doctrinal tradition ″Humani generis unitas″ (On the Unity of the Human Race) comes into play.

2. Since this teaching is not exclusively Roman Catholic, a broad understanding in inter-religious and secular dialogue is attainable. For instance, in the ″Convivialist Manifesto″[2] (Manifesto for a New Art of Living Together) declared in 2014, people from various different schools of thought wrestled with the urgent questions about the future and survival and reached the following fundamental consensus: ″The only legitimate kind of politics is one that is inspired by principles of common humanity, common sociality, individuation, and managed conflict. [...] Beyond differences in skin-colour, nationality, language, culture, religion and wealth, gender and sexual orientation, there is only one humanity, and that humanity must be respected in the person of each of its members.″

3. This ″principle of common humanity″ is radically called into question through the imperialistic models of globalisation, based as they are on dominance. Not that this is new: the prophets of ancient Israel were already unmasking the nature of the great empires with unsurpassed clarity. The imperialist symbol of the ″Tower of Babel″ (Genesis 11, 1-9) stands for a violent type of civilisation built not on cooperation but on rivalry, domination and vicious cycles of indebtedness. (In the end, the rich of this world ″protect″ themselves against the poor by means of walls reaching to the heavens.) In contrast to the confusion and disarray resulting from the Tower of Babel, the Christian symbol of ″Pentecost″ (Acts 2, 1-13) promises no return to a single language for all people. Rather, it speaks explicitly of a communicative space in which each person is able to understand and convey in their own language and culture whatever it takes for a liberated life for all. The vertical model of political, economic and cultural *hegemony* is cast down from its throne in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. In consequence, the horizontal growth of a human-family community can begin. Not unity based on power, but a community of dialogue and cooperation; not an economic area welded together beyond the needs of its inhabitants, but living spaces for the exchange of views, encounters and solidarity; not

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[1] *Impulse group 'One human family'*: ″Humani generis unitas“. Das katholische Dogma im dritten Jahrtausend: Die Einheit der menschlichen Familie. In: ″Es droht eine schwarze Wolke″. Katholische Kirche und Zweiter Weltkrieg. Volume 1: Lesesaal – Diskussion – Impulse. Published by order of pax christi, German Federal Executive and Peace Policy Commission. Berlin 2015, p. 283-332. www.paxchristi.de

[2] http://www.lesconvivialistes.org/abrege-du-manifeste-convivialiste

the military dictatorship of the peace of the graveyard but a peace process among peoples with their differences.

4. When Jesus proclaims the Good News to the poor, opposes the officious and arbitrary exercise of authority (Mark 10,42-43) or contemplates the possibility of non-violent resistance (Matthew 5,39), it must be borne in mind that his people lived under the Roman occupation. Later, early church writers will radically unmask the imperialist war apparatus: ″What are the ′advantages of the fatherland′ other than the disadvantages of a second state or people?″ (Lactantius) The early Christians were among those who did not collaborate with the imperialist system and its ″Mammon – might – military″ complex. Their refusal was rooted in a radically new immunity to the promises of possessions, the cult of power and violence in the kingdom of sadness. So non-collaboration goes hand in hand with an alternative approach, namely that of ″sharing – solidarity as among brothers and sisters – non-violence″. This then was the foundation which enabled the early church to overcome both national and religious barriers. Yet the very fact that this new Way brings together followers from all nations and across all boundaries makes it appear extremely suspicious in the eyes of the Empire. For these are sisters and brothers who regard themselves, precisely in their internationality, as the ″soul of the world″. The early Christians see themselves as the vanguard of a new humanity and trailblazers of a different globalisation under the banner of universal solidarity. Because the time for empires in this world has passed.

5. Two examples will serve to illustrate how different approaches and inspirations throughout the course of church history have been able to bolster the testimony to a single humanity. The mediaeval Meister Eckhart (d. 1328) bases his theology on the *″light that gives light to everyone″* (John 1.9). As he sees it, *no* human soul is without God. Consequently, love of self, love of our immediate neighbour and fellowship with humanity can never be regarded as opposites. ″If you love yourself, you love everybody else as you do yourself.″ Anyone whose life is light (″the light of all humankind″) attains full union and communion, ″and so you are as well disposed to a person who is across the sea, whom you never set eyes on, as to the person who is with you and is your close friend.″ – And two centuries later, for the Dominican and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1458-1566), it was above all his meeting with his oppressed brothers and sisters in another continent that brought home to him the unity of the human race. This pioneer of a belief in universal human rights finds the court verdict on the conquistadors in a Bible text from the Book of Sirach (34, 26-27), ″To take away a neighbour’s living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.″

6. What is too little known is that, as early as the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), there was an acute awareness in parts of the worldwide church of the need for a clear position to be taken on pernicious, violent developments in society and the fabric of 19th century civilisation. There was a call for a stand against racism, nationalism, militarism and imperialism. For Bishop Augustin Vérot of Savannah in the southern USA, for instance, his pastoral experience led him to regard the condemnation of racism as more pressing than grappling with German philosophers′ speculations on the origin of the human species. Faced with the build-up of arms and moral decline at an international level, a number of Council Fathers sought clarifications of the principles of international law. (Even the establishment of an international law tribunal at the Seat of Peter was mooted.) Sadly, it took the transformation of Europe through the mass slaughter of the First World War, 1914-1918, before Benedict XV pressed for this concern to be followed up as a matter of urgency. The Catholic trans-frontier peace movement, then led primarily by lay people, drew significant inspiration from this Pope.

7. Several years before the Second World War (1939-1945), the Congregation of the Faith already had expert opinions on the *War Ideology in the Racist State of the German Fascists* available to it. These papers also recorded the National Socialist attack on the principles of Christian universalism in relation to *economic practice, expansionism and militarism*. Unfortunately, these insights were restricted to internal documents. In the year before his death, however, Pius XI invoked the principle of the unity of human society: ″Catholic means universal and not racist, nationalistic, separatistic.″ (21.7.1938) *″It has been forgotten that the human race, the entire human race is a single, large, universal human race.″* (28.7.1938) Pius XI even charged the US American Jesuit and anti-racist activist John La Farge with the preparation of a draft encyclical, *″Humani generis unitas″* (On the Unity of the Human Race). A corresponding world church ″project″ could have encouraged many

more people to resist the murder machine that led, without any major resistance, to the annihilation of European Jews and more than 50 million war dead.

8. The Catholic teaching on the unity of the human family on the Earth as contained in ″Humani generis unitas″ has been attested to by Pope John XXIII and all his successors and it is one of the central messages of the Second Vatican Council (serving unity; dialogue with the entire world society based on partnership; brotherly and sisterly solidarity with other religions). Its aims go far beyond merely proclaiming a lofty ideal which simply overlooks the contradictions and abysses in the world. Rather, it strives precisely to unveil the iniquity of the domination of ″weaker″ states, the scandalous inequality in the distribution of the Earth's resources, and the indifference towards the fate of the poor. – In the light of our professed belief in one humanity, the founding of the UNO and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be acknowledged theologically as ″signs of the times″ (*Pacem in Terris*). Today, therefore, we can no longer ignore the fact that the spiritual, intellectual and cultural establishment of an awareness of the United Nations in our world's societies *and also* in the churches remains woefully underdeveloped. Devout Jews celebrate the feast of Simchat Torah, Rejoicing with the Torah, with singing and dancing. They thank God joyfully for the instructions and guidance for a good life; they know: people learn justice in a just community. Should we not celebrate the ″Beauty of International Law″ in a similar fashion, a feast that touches all peoples? Surely, after the abyss of two world wars, the vision of the United Nations has once more wakened the prospect of a life for civilisation beyond mass graves?

9. It is only in the knowledge of the power of non-violence that we find the courage to confront the violent structures of our world with the alternatives, namely a civilisation of loved ones. The problems on our planet, as they affect the fundamental existence of the members of the one human family that will follow us, can only be solved with the collaboration of all. The consequences of an aggressive economic ideology and an irrational religion of war always redound on everyone. The vision of a non-imperialistic, alternative globalisation under the banner of ″justice and peace″ is rooted in the beginnings of Christianity and it unites us with every hope-filled movement and emerging spirit. The Catholic teaching of ″Humani generis unitas″ also serves as a dam, holding back renewed flare-ups of racism, and an attestation to the inviolable human rights of all refugees. Above all, it brings us that powerful symbol which can serve today's world society as a pointer to a new way: ″one human family″. The solemn promulgation of the dogma of the unity of the human race could be a gift from the world church to itself, the whole world and generations to come. Since such an attestation concerns the whole of humanity, its advocates will seek the advice, support, shared joy and cooperation of not only the whole of Christendom and its Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, but also of all religions and ecumenical movements and indeed of all peoples and all people. A new generation of this world's young people, who are outraged at the arbitrary and pervasive disregard and contempt for common humanity, is open for a word that will serve life infallibly. The pointer to such a future can be imagined first and foremost as *the prelude to a festive happening for the whole Earth, a happening, free from constraint, that attracts and radiates* …

[Translated by a Sister in Scotland; 25.03.2016]