

WILLIBRORD MESSAGE 2021

Message from the Anglican and Old-Catholic Bishops in Continental Europe to their churches on the occasion of the Feast of St Willibrord, 7 November 2021

Every year the 'Willibrord-letter' is sent by the Anglican and Old-Catholic bishops in Europe, who meet every summer. The feast of Saint Willibrord is celebrated by Anglicans and Old Catholics of the Union of Utrecht and unites them in the common mission in Continental Europe. This year the letter was provided from the Old Catholic side by the Rev. David Birkman

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I was a first-year theology student in the United States during the financial crisis of 2009. Churches, like other institutions in society, were shaken to the core. Already having been plagued by decades of declining numbers, the major historical church bodies shrank so quickly in financial and numeric size that we were faced with existential questions. Our faculty and mentors were as nervous as we were – with one very notable exception: my Early Church History professor.

This professor, from Egypt, was a nun in the Coptic tradition. She had a very different outlook than her American mainline colleagues, who are used to corporate church structures and the resources (and burdens) that came with it. When we would talk about how long Christianity would survive, she would laugh. She said something like: “The Church will continue because it is not made by people. Worrying about that is silly; it is like worrying that time or space will cease to exist. It probably just won't be anything like what you are used to. And that is what you are truly worried about.”

She was right. It was like words of wisdom spoken to us out of centuries of experience of both prosperity and poverty – social embrace and persecution. The Church lives on under any circumstances; is not some corporate identity or a logo or even a confession.

Willibrord certainly knew this. He was sent from Rome to the far reaches of Europe to spread the Gospel of Christ and administer the sacraments among quasi-nomadic peoples. There was no budget, no infrastructure, no manual, no practical theological think tanks to give him advice. He had to just do it. And the church that would emerge in those places certainly looked and felt nothing like the church in Rome in terms of human experience. I can only imagine Willibrord had his own anxieties about all these things.

We are in a new world once again. The forces that had been changing the world were accelerated and intensified by the pandemic emergency. We cannot even imagine the reverberations this will have on the world. But digitalization, social distancing, and a deterioration of social trust will

continue their impact on the way the Church looks, feels, and operates. It will not, however, mean the end of the Church.

Today we must have the fortitude, the imagination, and the passion of Willibrord. We do not know this new land. It is unchartered. The ground is as soft and shifting as the muddy land of the Dutch Frisian Islands.

Knowing that we are stewards of the Church in this time and place but that there is nothing we can do to break it or to end it, we have a great freedom to be playful and innovative about our mission! In this way, the Church may again revisit the wisdom of the early Church.

On this Feast of Willibrord, I wish us all the spirit of exploration, joy, and fortitude!

In Christ,

David Birkman

Priest, Old-Catholic Dioceses in Germany