

Interview of Cardinal Marx with the german boulevard magazine STERN, 31st march 2022

“OF COURSE, I AM, JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE, A SEXUAL HUMAN BEING”

He calls for an end to celibacy and to the exclusion of homosexuals from the Church.

A conversation with Cardinal Reinhard Marx

In your position as archbishop, and as the first cardinal, you celebrated a queer church service. Wasn't homosexuality until recently considered a sin by the church?

Marx: Homosexuality is not a sin. It shows a Christian attitude when two people, regardless of their gender, stand up for each other in both joy and sorrow. I am talking about the primacy of love, especially in sexual encounters. Though I must admit that ten or fifteen years ago, I would not have imagined myself celebrating a church service this way. Now, I was very much looking forward to it.

Why now?

Marx: In the archdiocese, we have been trying for years to find opportunities to include queer people. For 20 years, there has been this queer Catholic community holding church services on a regular basis. They invited me to attend this anniversary. They had experienced hostilities, and to me it had become important for them to find a home in the church.

A cardinal with a rainbow flag at the altar must be a provocation to many conservatives. Has Rome already contacted you?

Marx: I have received quite a few letters on this subject in recent years but I think I am doing the right thing. For years now, I have felt freer about expressing my thoughts and I want to bring forward the church doctrine. The church is changing with the times, too: LGBTQ+ people are part of creation and loved by God and all of us are called to stand up against discrimination. Maybe the church is slower in some regards but this development is happening everywhere. Just a few years ago, most companies would not have accepted openly homosexual board members.

No company had homosexuality defined as a sin in their company statutes.

Marx: Why are you talking about sin all the time? This is about the quality of relationships. There are some in church who have not yet sufficiently discussed this question, you are right about that. But sin means turning away from God, turning away from the Gospel, and you cannot assume that of all those who are living in same-sex relationships and then even say: away with them.

Please explain how homosexual, queer or transgender people ought to be integrated into Catholic doctrine.

Marx: An inclusive ethics that we have in mind is not a more lax one - as some claim. This is about something else: meeting at eye level, respecting the other person. The value of love is shown in the relationship: by not turning the other person into an object, by not using or humiliating the other person, by being faithful to each other, and reliable. The Catechism is not set in stone. One is allowed to doubt what is in there. We discussed these questions during the family synod but were reluctant to put anything in writing. Even back then, I said: There are people living in an intimate and loving relationship which also has a sexual expression. And we are to say this has no value? Sure, there are people who insist on seeing sexuality as something limited to procreation but what do they tell people who can't have children? Anyway, I do feel a bit strange talking too much about the details of sexuality...

...as someone who does not have any sexuality himself?

Marx: Of course, I am - just like everyone else - a sexual person. I do have a sexuality, too, even though I am not living in a relationship.

A homosexual couple in Munich could receive a blessing from a Catholic priest. But it only takes crossing the Brenner to perhaps be told by an Italian bishop that you will go straight to hell for that. How does this add up?

Marx: Whoever threatens homosexuals with hell has not understood anything. At our queer church service, listening to the transgender women telling of how painful her path had been - also regarding her faith - I must walk towards her.

Have you given your blessing to same-sex couples?

Marx: A few years ago, in Los Angeles, after a church service where I had preached about unity and diversity, I was approached by two who wanted to meet me and who asked for my blessing. I did. After all, this wasn't a wedding. We cannot offer the sacrament of marriage.

So, there are two categories of love after all?

Marx: Love is not only conjugal love. We are also facing the question of what to do with remarried divorcees. Will they no longer receive a blessing? In that respect, it might be helpful if we could bless their relationship. But this is not about my personal opinion but about creating a consensus. In Africa or in the Orthodox churches, there are sometimes quite different concepts. It doesn't help people if we become divided on this question but we must not stand still either.

This doesn't sound as though we will see a modernization of the universal church anytime soon.

Marx: I do wonder why there is this fixation on this one topic. At the same time, there would be exciting dogmatic questions for us to discuss, the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of Christ - but with these, there is hardly any need for discussion. With all human relationships, which therefore also includes same-sex couples, the Gospel is the benchmark: we want to live together in faithfulness and find the strength to forgive. Because the life of a Christian is not arbitrary. The question for us Catholic priests ought to be: are there two people living together in a binding relationship? And: a blessing is after all not a sacrament but a consolation. This is an emotional topic; I already know what the letters will say that will follow this interview.

Can you also imagine married priests?

Marx: Yes, there will be no total collapse if there are both unmarried and married priests. The look at other churches shows that.

Was it a problem for you to decide in favor of celibacy before the ordination?

Marx: Back then, all of us at the course smiled at the wording we had to sign: "I gladly take up celibacy". But we were just the same united in thinking that for us it was the greatest and most beautiful thing imaginable to be called to the priesthood. As a teenager I definitely took part in many crazy things. If you ask my contemporaries, they will not tell you I was a bore. Later on, I spent my sabbatical as candidate in Paris and got the chance to get to know this great city. 1974, a time of departure! Of course, there was also the impulse to discover love life but the other was stronger for me.

Have you never been in love?

Marx: At least not in such a way that I would have said, for this person I will throw away everything else. But there are of course people I do find attractive; it would be dishonest to deny it. Celibacy does not mean living without any human relationships.

What is your environment like?

Marx: As a young priest I enjoyed living alone. Afterwards, I was always living in an institution, there were nuns, priests. Until today I am not living alone. There is the chaplain, two sisters, one of whom is with me for more than 20 years. We know each other very well, we know a lot about each other - but we nevertheless address each other formally.

Seriously?

Marx: But why not? We are living together in a community, in a family of its own style so to speak. In any way, I am not living alone, and I couldn't do that. There is a reason that on the first pages of the Holy Bible one reads: It is not good that man should be alone.

Are you still in contact with friends from school?

Marx: This year, we will hold our 50th high school reunion, so I am looking forward to the encounters. Most of the time, I then also attend the marksmen's festival in Geseke. Like in old times, we sit under the chestnut trees and tell each other old tales, in Franz' garden where I once smoked my first cigarette. I enjoy this.

What was your incentive to become a priest?

Marx: I always wanted this. I remember the chaplain coming to our house because it was my turn for first Holy Communion and my mother told him: Reinhard wants to become a priest. The chaplain smiled and said: let us wait and see.

Did you play Holy Mass when you were a child?

Marx: Certainly, all of it. One wonders where this comes from. I did not grow up in a particularly religious household. My father was a liberal and critical of the church. But I was magically drawn towards this liturgy. I ran into church all by myself, I admired these large windows and imagined what it would be like...

You have risen to become one of the most important men of the universal Catholic church – but this church is demolished.

Marx: That is probably true.

Many people leave the Church because they are under the impression that they will get along better without it.

Marx: We must remember to uncover the essentials. So that people will understand: the Church belongs to the faith. What is the center of it all? Religion is not a charity event, nor is it a producer of morals. It's about a place where heaven opens. We need to ensure that the true church can be experienced. This exaggerated dogmatics where everything must be organized and where the first question is who may "participate"? What Bible are people reading who think like this? No, Jesus would say: whoever is of good intention should take a seat at my table. And one quickly understands whom he criticized the most – the scribes, the Pharisees, in short: all those who wanted to decide who was in and who was out. The space for an encounter with God ought to be wide open to all people of good will.

And what would his judgement be on those who for years protected priests who abused children?

Marx: The entire system, the whole atmosphere must change. These closed systems and a possible abuse of clerical power pose a danger. Certainly, celibacy is not automatically a cause for abuse but we must confess: the concealment, and the interest to primarily protect the institution and its reputation – and only then to notice the victims, that unfortunately exists until today! The church must become more transparent, it must share its power and offer possibilities to act and to shape. The partially wrong concept of obedience needs to be reviewed. There must be no hierarchy anymore where superiors are only being told what they want to hear.

Are you capable to accept criticism, Cardinal?

Marx: One must be open to criticism even if it's difficult. My doctoral thesis had the fine title "Is Church different?". Back then, I was already on the track that the church must also learn from society, not just vice versa. But how? I also raised that question with the Pope just recently: how to learn from society? Social sciences, organizational culture, leadership behavior. You can't just say it's all in the Bible.

What did you learn yourself?

Marx: For example, after I had been in Munich for ten years, I ordered an anonymous survey to be conducted among superiors as to how they viewed the bishop. Where were the deficits? That was illuminating.

What was mentioned as your flaw in it?

Marx: I do not wish to go into detail here. They were structural things but, yes, also personal ones. It happens that people feel overpowered by me being so talkative. I have to be careful in this respect and say to myself: You now need to listen as well! However, such a culture of feedback is not very widespread within the church.

How do you deal with the abuse report you had ordered to be prepared by a law firm and which comes to a disastrous conclusion? Is there a “feedback culture”?

Marx: I recently attended a public event of the Advisory Committee for Victims at the Archdiocese. It was about hearing the victims, listening to them, to better understand what they say and want. We can only learn from this; a real dialogue must be held at eye level. There is a lot of writing and emails, and it's very outspoken.

When did you first notice that the inner life of the church was flawed?

Marx: One of the first points was many years ago, when I was driving to attend a meeting with my ordination course. I had to pull the car over to the side of the road because I had heard on the radio that a Swiss bishop had become a father. It shocked me that there were even bishops who did not remain faithful to celibacy.

But this is not about a bishop who broke his vows of celibacy. When did you realize that it is the church structure that allows for child abuse to happen?

Marx: This certainly wasn't that obvious to me before 2010. For example, I had never heard about what had been going on at Kloster Ettal or the Canisius Kolleg.

Hard to believe. In the 1990s, Austria's church had already been shaken because the then archbishop of Vienna had himself been convicted of serious abuse against young boys. 500.000 people demanded a radical renewal of the church.

Marx: Yes, you are right. But this case seemed to be completely unique. It was disturbing. But you are pointing out a sore spot: We did not notice the signs in time. I have just now reread a book about the case where everything is meticulously listed. And it made me feel sick all over again.

What about your self-criticism in dealing with all this?

Marx: During my time as bishop of Trier, I noticed, maybe there is more than you had suspected until now. Then came 2010 which showed us what had happened in monasteries and elsewhere in the church. However, when I arrived in Trier, it never occurred to me to deal with the entire past. Back then, one didn't arrive somewhere as a new bishop – be it in Trier or in Munich – and ask for a list of priests who had in this area previously been noted as perpetrators or suspects. This idea never even occurred to me. Today this would certainly be different...

The former archbishop of Cologne Meisner obviously knew more, he kept a file in which he held the names of the “Brothers in the mist” under lock and key...

Marx: That system always gave precedence to the reputation of the church. And that is bitter, and we must take responsibility for it. Very clearly. When I asked for my resignation last spring, I said so as well. I thought it was necessary to set an example. Someone ought to take responsibility for all this. I did not feel any external pressure back then. But within I did. That was no game for me.

Did you believe the Pope would agree to that?

Marx: It was surely open-ended. I had decided to not just send my letter to the Pope but I wanted to tell him in person. After all, we have been working together for a long time. I read my letter to him

and let him decide what to do with it, but I stated my request very clearly. He told me: I need time to think about this. That's when I thought: he will consent to this request in some way after all.

But he didn't.

Marx: No. I could well have imagined still taking on a priestly task for the next years. I didn't want retirement. But I wanted to make it clear that bishops, too, have responsibility for the entire institution. I have been a bishop for 25 years and I cannot claim to have been living on the moon during all that time. I was there.

Now and today, do you enjoy being a bishop?

Marx: I do. (laughs) Yes, I do. But it's not that easy. When I was at a meeting with the rural youth lately, someone asked me if I would again become a priest today. Normally, one gives a quick reply to such a question. But I said that the reply wasn't so easy for me. I like being a priest. That hasn't changed. When I celebrate Holy Mass in the morning, I realize what bliss that is. I would not want to abandon that. But I did not foresee how difficult it would be.

Your picture of the situation of the church was too optimistic?

Marx: I became a priest in 1979. There was John Paul II. with all his buoyancy, with the power. And with the political force he unleashed we thought we would once again gather steam. We hadn't yet understood the transformation that lay ahead of us. I am absolutely convinced that a new era is awaiting Christianity. But the changes run deeper than we could have imagined 30 or 40 years ago.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow claims that Putin's war is essential to protect Ukraine from Western ideas such as homosexuality.

Marx: I am convinced: as a Christian I clearly advocate peace, freedom, democracy and human rights. This includes that people must not be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

There are many people in Africa or South America who think differently, including bishops.

Marx: There, too, exist differing opinions regarding topics such as homosexuality. Many share our views. The universal church consists of particular churches located in varying cultures. The Pope is the foundation of unity. This means he must ensure that all channels of communication remain open. That sure is a lively discussion process.

In the currently belligerent situation, many are looking to the Pope. His pre-predecessor was seen as a great peace broker. Could Francis do the same?

Marx: I am receiving many letters in this regard. Some people, for example, tell me the Pope should fly to Mariupol by helicopter, then the weapons would be silent. I trust the Pope will carefully consider his options. He condemned the war in clear words. And for as much as I know him, he is not fearful to set unusual signs as well.

Would this be the great chance to show what this church is still capable of?

Marx: This is not about the reputation of the church! I am encouraged by the fact that so many people want to help the fugitives both here in Germany and in Ukraine. Last week, I visited the InfoPoint of our Caritas at Munich central station which has become the first contact point for thousands of fugitives. I am very impressed by their dedication, and I feel a deep gratitude for their work. The church needs to be present there.