



ECEN Assembly 2021:

## **In Christ's Spirit: Celebrate the Interruption!**

### **The Churches' Contribution to Ecological Transformation**

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### **Reconciled with the Earth**

#### **Does Climate Change and Sustainable Future Pose a Particular Theological Concern?**

##### I

Reconciliation with the earth cannot be separated from corporeality and is closely linked to the care of and reverence for life, the „Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben“, as Albert Schweitzer put it. He grew up close by in Alsace, he did his studies in theology and medicine at Strasbourg and became a well-known organist in addition. „I am life that wants to live in the midst of life that wants to live“ is the famous phrase he coined. In saying so, Schweitzer did not intend to suggest an idealized, harmoniously blurred image of life in God's creation, but rather pinpointed the challenges that arise ecologically. A sustainable future cannot be realized without conflicts; the theme you have chosen, „Reconciled with the Earth“ does already clearly indicate to this fact.

We hear the groaning of God's creation and the sighing of all his creatures. We perceive the limits of growth. If everyone lived like we do here in the region of Baden, we would need to have three to four planets at our disposal. We can and must develop technological, economic and political perspectives in order to balance the eco-system. Nevertheless, we have to realize: Life lives at the expense of other lives. Biblical and theological insights are realistic at this point. „Reconciliation with the Earth“ in the full sense of the word does only exist within an eschatological horizon. In the beginning, the act of God's creation leads to the exclamation „Behold, it was very good“ (Genesis 1:31) At the end of time, „wolf and lamb will feed together; and the lion will eat straw like the ox, ... . They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.“ (Isaiah 65:25)

##### II

In the Holy Spirit, this new reality is already present among us today. It opens up new perspectives in everyday life in dealing with concrete and challenging issues of climate justice or the loss of biodiversity. For me, a key to this is the biblical and theological concept of interruption: The first biblical narrative of God's creation does not lead up to the creation of humankind but to the rest of God. God has done enough. God takes a rest. It is here that the word „Shabbat“ can be found for the first time. It simply means „to interrupt“ „to stop“. In its further biblical use the word „shabbat“ varies in its connotations; while in some places its focus is on calm rest, in other places its use indicates a sharp stop sign against exploitation; occasionally its meaning comes close to refusal or strike. God blesses this interruption: the seventh day is one of the essential basic practices of faith! When we celebrate Sunday the new reality of God incarnates and takes shape among us in a concrete way and radiates into our everyday life.

This tradition is carried on by the Scriptures of the New Testament. Each and every Sunday that we observe is a celebration of Easter in its own kind, a mutual confirmation that Christ has broken the power of death. We experience that life is more than calculated purposeful action. Life is full of festive elements and celebration. It involves an anticipation of the new reality that God promises us. The German poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe captured the specific mood of an Easter walk in just one sentence, to be found in his famous drama „Faust“: „Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich's sein!“ „Here I am a human being, here I am allowed to be.“ On Easter day and -



along with it – on each Sunday we are free to stroll, without having a purpose in mind, and if possible, in kind company.

At the same time, as we are celebrating the interruption, we renew the strength to come to grips with our everyday life where we act individually and socially with intent. In these actions we draw inspiration from the new reality which we experience in a common spiritual existence empowered by the pause the worship provided and fortified to take responsibility for life on this earth.

### III

Many biblical stories and the conflicts they reflect indicate how essential it is to interrupt and to pause. Let us take, for example, the Manna story which we find in the Exodus book, chapter 16: Israel flees slavery in Egypt. The food is running out. At this point God makes manna rain and instructs the families to gather just as much food every day as required to be sufficiently fed on that very day. There is enough for everyone. If a family collects more than necessary, the food collected in abundance will get spoiled.

On the sixth day there is double the amount of manna. Six days of work are sufficient to get the food required for seven days. The profit generated is not to be accumulated, but rather used to regularly spend free time together and to reflect on what God has done good to us and on what he calls us to do. Only those who pause regularly in this spirit and observe the interruption in community can live responsibly and well.

The concept of reliable and common interruption in faith has a broad horizon. It includes not only the people who consider themselves part of a community, but also the strangers, the slaves, the animals, the whole creation. Every seven years the soil should lie fallow, since it has produced enough. Every fifty years there is a debt relief so that power and wealth do not accumulate evermore faster in evermore fewer hands. Children should not get stuck in inherited debts and in all that is associated with unjust opportunities.

In the New Testament, too, we find stories that show how pausing intensifies spiritual energy and opens up ground-breaking perspectives. Just think of the adulteress who was just about to be stoned when Jesus writes calmly in the sand and thereby interrupts the dynamics of the conflict. The feeding miracles demonstrate that, by God's grace, there is enough to remain in communion and to set forth on a new path.

The concept of a regular, reliable interruption is a basic component of an „economy of enough“: in this economy all have enough for a good life. Individuals are satisfied having enough of what is required for their personal lifestyle. There is also an „enough“ in relation to public consumption of resources. Focussing on the „enough“ will provide the mark where good life succeeds: in harmony with all creation, in view of the near and distant others and of those who come after us.

### IV

Celebrating the interruption in Christ's spirit! How does this help churches to contribute to reconciliation with the earth?

**First: Pausing interrupts prevailing logics and constraints. Based on trust in Christ's love it creates freedom to think and walk new paths of reconciliation; it provides a space in which we can find a way between supposedly clear alternatives.**

When we interrupt in the Spirit of Christ it makes us hear the groaning of all creatures. It sharpens the senses and the mind. It sharpens ears: it makes us hear the quiet sounds as well as the roaring of the breaking of glaciers into the sea.

**Secondly: Sundays reliably set limits in our everyday life. Only those who can stop, pause, and freely restrict themselves will live.**



I am a human being, amongst other human beings and creatures; I am not God, nor are the others. This is the basic limit the Sunday hints to. It is the day which stands for an „economy of the enough“. It is the day which invites us to regularly pause and interrupt, so as not to be driven by „the ever more“ the „ever better and more perfect“ whose permanent increase threatens individual and social peace as well as the ecological livelihoods. For far too long, the people of the Global South, future generations and our co-creation were regarded as resources that we can fall back on at any time.

The Sunday urges us to respect our limits: our limits in regard to our achievements, in regard to our rights in dealing with others and the world, and yes, also in regard to our responsibility which, to our good, is limited too. The issue of limits is particularly pressing in view of climate change and the rapid decrease of biodiversity. Does the pandemic also have anything to do with human penetration into hitherto largely untouched nature and wildlife? But we also know the consequences of individual and social psychological and physical overload, as attributed to the „entrepreneurial-self“. Neither human beings nor other creatures should be subjected to any purpose without limits, they may be politically, economically, or socially justified. All life has a right in itself.

This is why the Bible starts off with the big word „enough“ as just described. „Behold, it was very good.“ God himself/herself pauses and sets a limit to the own activity and to all life. We live from this divine „enough“; for us it means on the one hand a strengthening of confidence – remember the appraisal: It is good; there is enough for all! - and on the other hand it means a beneficial restriction, as expressed by the phrase: Just let it be enough, that does it! It is on Sundays, in each worship service, that we as churches remember, update and celebrate this double meaning of „enough“. We pause, we let ourselves be interrupted, and we experience how it is to receive life and to entrust it again to God in the end! Even as active adults we live by God's grace!

**Thirdly: On Sunday the spirit and the power of the new reality are entrusted to us as the basis on which we build in shaping the other six days of the week.**

The Sunday firmly embeds each *person* in a horizon that transcends production and reproduction. Everything that is attributed to me in connection with these aspects, all the expectations and demands of others, but also my own, are relativized in this horizon. I am more than what others (or myself) see in me, and I am different from that, too. Especially in these times, when the personal is increasingly being used and exploited economically and politically, the Sunday stands for the non-negotiable dignity of each person, attributed by God, and for his or her right to remain a mystery, but it also stands for the power entrusted to us by God as a very personal gift. Despite all my limitations, my failures and my vulnerability: I am able to actively take responsibility, at least within my range, for even the big issues of our time such as the climate change. The activities of the ecological movements and the impetus provided by the ecological footprint concept testify to that.

The Sunday promotes *social interrelationships* which do not ask for benefits and resist the advancing segmentation generated by social bubbles and milieus. The social significance Sundays provide is fundamentally described by the notion of compassion and the idea of justice in a comprehensive sense: People perceive each other in their difference. They take responsibility for each other. They strengthen each other in their diversity. The new sustainability which is required will rely on forms of co-existence and cooperation which do not see others primarily as competitors or even enemies, but rather continue to develop realistic concepts of sharing and of a sharing economy.

The Sunday provides a specific form of *conflict resolution*: Faced with the impossibility of overcoming slavery in Egypt through social regulations, Israel moves out of Egypt and resolves the social conflict by means of spatial dissociation. On the other hand, the Sabbath and the Jubilee Year open up forms of conflict resolution in which the conflict parties involved stay together and find ways which lead to more justice in a committed and reliable coexistence. „Six



days you shall labour and do all your work, ... but on the seventh day you shall not work, nor your servants, nor the alien within your gates.“ (Ex. 20:9-10)

The Sunday is like a fresh breeze for **creation**. The biblical visions of the coming Kingdom of Peace promise that it is not only humans who will experience true peace, within themselves and among each other, but that it is the whole creation whose groaning will come to an end. That is a perspective which has found too little attention throughout the history of the church.

Fortunately, a rethinking has taken place in this respect since some time now. Celebrating the interruption in the spirit of Christ makes us aware of the limits which are set to our actions. It opens our eyes to the need that we freely restrict ourselves in living together with our fellow creatures. Our actions and lettings must be determined by the horizon of God's blessing. This does also apply, for example, to the way in which we handle our church property, including our real estate and the lease of church owned land. It equally applies to our public witness in general.

## V

In the struggle for reconciliation with the earth churches are particularly obliged to contribute the theological concept of an interruption of the instrumental, solely purpose-oriented way of thinking and acting. They will advocate the long-established social practice of Sunday which publicly celebrates what is promised as a good life within the framework of an „economy of enough“, namely: the recognition of individual dignity, a reconciled and sustainable community and the uplifting care of creation.

We do not, however, celebrate the Sunday to improve our work on Monday attempting to then be even better, faster and more effective. Just as God himself/herself pauses to look and observe, to rejoice and enjoy, so does the Sunday also live from the freedom and joy of God's children. It is not aimed at a benefit first (even though it may go along with many), it rather stands for a voluntary self-restriction, not only individually, but also socially. We pause together regularly, to limit submission to purposes: to my own, and to that of others, thereby keeping in mind the weak in particular, the fellow creatures, and future generations. Or, to put it positively, we intend to live and nurture what makes us human. Erich Fromm has listed with respect to this: to pray, to study, to eat, to drink, to sing, to love, and I would add: to play, to listen, to watch!