

## ABOUT THE BEGINNING

In autumn 1989, the people of East Germany shouted: 'We are the people!' and then the Berlin Wall fell.

Six years later, **we** shouted 'We are church' – and more than three million people followed us all over the world.

What had happened?

In the spring of 1995, allegations of abuse against Cardinal Groer of Vienna became public. The reaction of the church leadership was to indignantly reject the allegations and to reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator by denigrating and accusing the victim. There was no sign of insight or apology, let alone any willingness to investigate the deeper causes of the susceptibility to abuse in the Church (mandatory celibacy, a very restrictive sexual morality, the position of women). This situation damaged the reputation of the Church leadership and thus also of the entire Church to an unprecedented extent.

As religious instructors, we felt the dramatic decline in acceptance of the Church particularly among young people on a daily basis and thus became close witnesses to a deep crisis in the Church. So in 1995, Thomas Plankensteiner and his pupils formulated our goals.

And then the three of us called for a 'church referendum'. Almost two and a half million people in Austria and later on in Germany and Southern Tyrol signed it. In doing so, they stood up and declared that they were the 'people of God.' They renounced childlike obedience and asserted: 'We are Church!' This triggered two things: we frightened many people – and we became empowered. The space for freedom that this opened up is large, wide, dangerous and promising.

Under the pressure and loss of reality imposed by a large, authoritarian ecclesiastical regime something emerged that is very much part of Christianity: fearlessness. We did not ask what would come next, what the outcome would be. We stood up and acted according to our conscience. In this way, many women and men declared themselves to be God's active people. We no longer saw ourselves as objects to be cared for and patronised by clerics, but rather as God's common people, all on an equal footing, all on eye-level. Thousands of women and men stood up with us, even in the most remote villages and towns. Unknown people who are never

mentioned distributed lists and collected signatures, experiencing resistance, widespread acceptance and showing fearlessness.

It was a new form of protest. There had been synods and petitions, declarations and vehement inquiries to the Vatican before. But now it was no longer about church committees, universities, organised groups, but about the rank and file who experience everyday life in the church and find their own voice. The fact that such a 'citizens' movement' could be so successful despite having no organisational or financial backing also aroused the interest of politicians. The future Austrian President Heinz Fischer came to Innsbruck to meet Thomas Plankensteiner where he showed great interest in our campaign.

What is the space for freedom that has been opened up by the Church People's Petition?

It is about a different kind of community of women and men, about freedom from ecclesiastical and sexual paternalism. It is about a relationship between the clergy and the 'rank and file' that is free of domination. It goes against the core of Roman culture of domination, which restricts, controls, patronises and punishes people. It is about creating a detoxified atmosphere of understanding and trust.

'We Are Church' has been calling for all this for 30 years now.

The Church will not be able to regain the credibility it has lost over decades so quickly. We have never claimed or believed that implementing our demands would trigger a new influx (influx!) of people into the Church in the short term. We have never been concerned with quick, superficial success, but with a fundamental reconciliation of the Christian message and church structures.

And we have certainly achieved a great deal, even if our demands have not yet been implemented in full. But the change in mentality this has triggered in all circles and strata of the Church, is – on closer inspection – overwhelming: Who would have dreamed that a Bishop of Rome would withdraw his authority to the point of asking the self-critical question: 'Who am I to judge a person who seeks God and is of good will' – regardless of their sexual orientation (return flight from Rio, July 2013). Who could overlook the fact that, especially in recent synodal years, the insight has matured that the *una sancta catholica* cannot live its faith in a prescribed worldwide 'uniformity,' but rather unfolds its vitality (*wei...*) in a unity rooted

in the diversity of God? After all, who can fail to see that, alongside the teaching of doctrine, the contours of a pastoral teaching are becoming apparent in the Church, one that emphasises with people's lives – just as Jesus of Nazareth exemplified?

Above all, who can overlook the fact that in many parishes women perform all kinds of religious services and act as deacons, even without having been ordained? They celebrate the sacraments with those concerned by taking the lead. In many a parish, the priest lives quite officially in the rectory with his wife and children. That there are even parishes without a priest, just a lay parish-leader, and the people realize that they do not need an ordained priest? Who can overlook the fact that there is an 'OutinChurch' movement, where church employees profess their queerness?

We certainly did not achieve all this on our own, but we made a significant contribution to bringing about this change in thinking.

We are Church! – the name is more relevant than ever. If Catholicism loses its open-minded people, it will degenerate into a fundamentalist segment of the New Right and its populist politicians, who like to use the absolutist constitution of the Church as a model for their anti-democratic goals.

We very much hope that the 'Synod on Synodality' will be an important step towards building a fraternal and sisternal Church. That the entire people of God, including the clergy, will learn **what** "equality" means in its ultimate radicality. After all, all our demands are already being discussed at the Synod– even if they have been relegated to vague (weig) study groups as 'hot topics'. We remain vigilant (witschilant) and ensure that 'synodality' does not become a sleeping pill.

So it remains true, yes: after thirty years of We Are Church, it is all the more urgent: the Church is journeying together as the people of God. In the **diverse** community of the baptised, it can effectively realise its identity – on an equal footing, on eye level, in equality.