

**Conferral of the Honorary Doctorate on Adelgunde Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn
(Dr. theol. honoris causa)**

**September 10, 2021
Faculty of Catholic Theology
Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms University, Bonn**

Address by A. Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends and relatives who are present here, and all who are taking part in this ceremony via ZOOM, and in particular a cordial greeting to our friends at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: from this place, I wish you a *Shabat Shalom*.

On a working visit in Brussels in 2019, Jochen Sautermeister told me about the intention of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn to confer on me the honorary Doctorate of Theology. This was so unexpected and surprising that I felt this honor was too great for me to accept. However, after several conversations, both with confidential and with open advisors, I decided not to reject this gift of the honorary doctorate, but to accept it in all humility and modesty. And so I now stand here before you, without having written a dissertation, but having intensively studied the academic discourses in the theology of marriage, in bioethics, in the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, and in “the Study of the Dialogue“ in Judaism and Christianity. I have spoken in greater detail about some of these encounters in a number of books, articles, and lectures, mostly in English, French, Italian, and Dutch.

But before I speak about the modest experiences and insights that I have gathered in the course of my life, I should like to say that I miss at this moment an important person, to whom I was married for fifty years, and with whom I have shared my life. Without my husband Hubert, I would not have been able to carry out my tasks as I did. This moment is dedicated to him too, together with a great gratitude! For despite his serious illness, he supported me until the very end in the shared task of our lives. And I should like to thank our two families, who were always helpful, even when sometimes a great deal of understanding was asked of them!

Last but not least, I should like to thank the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn, especially the members of the Faculty Council who passed the resolution to confer the honorary doctorate on me, and all those who have helped to make this ceremony so festive.

When Covid 19 took us by surprise everywhere in the world one and a half years ago, we could not yet imagine that the virus would still be accompanying us now.

We have had to learn to become flexible, to postpone initiatives, and to drop plans. Today's ceremony too had to be postponed three times.

In connection with climate change, we are forcibly experiencing once again a global crisis on an existential scale, for the first time after the Second World War ended seventy-five years ago. Have we not reached a point where we must take new paths, if we are to leave the coming generations a more sustainable world? This concerns and challenges each and every one of us who is here now.

This Covid time has also caused me to reflect. What could the significance of this day that honors me actually be for me – or rather, for us?

Permit me now to share with you now, not so much learned academic insights, but rather important experiences from my life, and to reflect on them. In all the experiences, shared encounters and a “community en route” play a role. And thus one could say: These are experiences of a synodal path.

1 – My biographical-spiritual roots

Thanks to my parental home in the Rhineland, I am a Christian, and I have remained faithful to the Catholic church, although in recent years, and at this precise moment, many challenges occupy our energy! Rhineland Catholicism is keenly aware of what happens over the course of time when a baptized Christian no longer sees the center of our faith, the service of the Lord Jesus and the Spirit of God, and what prevails is clericalism or legalism. The so-called “fringsen” helped people in an understanding, pastoral spirit in the post-War period – and not only then. People today are also looking for pastors with this kind of “fringsen” mentality, which has left a deep mark on our typically Rhineland faith¹.

This is the ability of our faith to pick people up where they are, with their concerns, without thinking one must answer questions that at the moment are not in fact being asked. Does not Pope Francis, with his spirituality, show us this – and we can read this in his writings too? This is the core of our faith, which motivates our pastoral and missionary impetus to live the Gospel and to experience it together. The small groups in our world Church “only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel.”² I am grateful to my Rhineland Catholic family home, where I learned this. Two of my brothers, who are present here, can certainly confirm this.

Not only my Rhineland Catholicism is important, but also, later on, the sister churches, thanks not least to their strong attachment to the Bible. And I must not fail to mention the spirituality of Saint Ignatius with his thirty-day Exercises.

All these are the biographical and spiritual roots of my life and of my commitment. I should now like to talk about this.

¹ The verb “fringsen” is derived from the name of Cardinal Joseph Frings.

² EG 262

II – Attempts at orientation on questions of bioethics in the 1980s

I had another synodal experience in the 1980s. I encountered Professor Franz Böckle, a moral theologian in Bonn, several times. He belonged as one of the leaders to an international circle of competent bioscientists, human geneticists, moral theologians, and ethicists, which Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini had courageously founded in 1983. Böckle took part with passion and with a great sense of responsibility.

This initiative was visionary and urgently needed at that time; it was a “first” in the Catholic church. My husband and I were highly enthusiastic about this, and we were allowed as laypersons to accompany a number of bioethicists from very various European universities. We attended at that time an intensive course under Professor Maurice de Wachter in Maastricht. Prominent theologians such as Klaus Demmer, Bruno Schüller, Joseph Fuchs, John C. Harvey, Edmund Pellegrino, Francesco Abel, Alonso Bedate, and André Hellegers (to mention only a few) belonged at that time to this “*International Study Group on Bioethics*.” Under the leadership of Cardinal Martini, this international circle met once a year in Europe and in Washington to reflect together, in private, on important and urgent bioethical questions. Initially, Rome kept a watchful eye on these international professors of moral theology and ethics, but despite the skepticism they encountered, these Catholic scholars remained convinced that they ought to continue this process of thinking and exchanging responsibly, conscientiously, and prudently.

The questions that were urgent at that time have lost nothing of their extreme importance. On the contrary, the circle was renewed internationally in 2010 as the *International Bioethics Group* (IBG) under the leadership of Professor Roberto Dell’Oro from Los Angeles. Some of the professors from this group are present here today: Maureen Kenny from Dublin and Emmanuel Agius from Malta. And this brings me to my next point!

III – *What makes a marriage happy? How does one tackle this in marriage? And in partnerships and within a family?*

"I have witnessed how divine providence has brought you two together and, in truth, if I have ever believed that I saw two persons united by God, you were those two. Love each other, as travelers on a journey love each other, love each other in the certainty that you must one day leave each other, love each other in the hope that at the last, you will find each other again for ever. Thank Heaven for having led you to this goal, not through stormy and transient joys, but through suffering and misery, in order to lead you to a calm and reverent joyfulness." This wonderful quotation comes from the *chef d'œuvre* of Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*.

This quotation moved me in 1989 when I, as a married woman, founded our *International Academy for Marital Spirituality* (INTAMS). With the starting point in these fundamental reflections, we carried out our interdisciplinary and international and ecumenical researches into the theology of marriage. We regularly held colloquies and symposia. In 1992, we founded the international academic periodical *Marriage, Family & Spirituality*, previously under the name of the INTAMS review. INTAMS has been constituted as an international association according to Belgian law since December 1994, and this Institute moved to the Catholic University in Louvain in 2005. Both the periodical and our colloquies and symposia have displayed their character as international initiatives by taking up, from the very outset, important and urgent themes, even when some of these theses

initially stood under an ecclesiastical taboo. We also looked at various forms of marriage as it is lived in the various cultures and religions. To mention one contemporary example, in 2019, we studied the topic of “Children in Same-Sex Households“. A special issue on the urgent theme of “Sexual abuse in families“ appeared in 2020. This thematic issue found a great international resonance – which shows that there still remains much work to be done in this field.

And the thematic issue that appeared a short time ago takes up the topic of “Marriage in Jewish and Christian Perspective“.

Marriage and responsible, binding partnerships are understood today in very different ways, from one culture to another.

In the interdisciplinary work of INTAMS as an international organization with married and unmarried scholars who feel united to the church, we study the question of how one can promote and support successful partnerships, marriages, and families. It is necessary to shed light in an interdisciplinary context on all the challenges and difficulties, to study from the ecumenical perspective of the various Christian churches, and to think through these questions in a pastoral manner. In view of the cultural and ecumenical sensitivity to “the signs of the times,” we are convinced that the model of marriage can still offer orientation for empathy, respect, trust, willingness to dialogue, and equality – as values both for husband and wife, and also for same-sex couples, where the partners invest in each other, grow together, and let their fantasy take flight, while at the same they also learn to live with boundaries. All those who seriously enter into a marriage and are willing to be open for a family together, are conscious of their responsibility for each other and for the shared task of bringing up children. Marriage means the development of a professional culture based on the shared life in a partnership and on common responsibility, and in an appropriate application of the principle of subsidiarity. It also involves the reality of getting older, which the partners should allow each other to do. We must not fail to hear the cry of elderly persons who are afraid that they will be forgotten.³

All our experiences show that even today, the value of the marriage bond is still highly appreciated. This is why graduality in pastoral care and in the accompaniment of marriages has a high and spiritual value. There are marriages where the hopes and dreams of the couple are not fulfilled, but the majority precisely of these marriages continue to exist, even when they have to go through periods of hard trials.

No matter how one experiences, or must experience, marriage in one’s own case or that of others, it remains particularly honorable in the light of the Christian faith. This unity in differentness, formed by love, finds its expression in the mutual marriage vow. As such, it must not remain a matter of private experience, since of its nature it radiates out onto the entire community of believers and into society.

Some professors from INTAMS are present here today: Professors Thomas Knieps Port le Roi, (Louvain), David Dawson (Rome), Alphons Vansteenwege (Louvain), and Herwi Rikhof (Nijmegen/Utrecht).

IV – *What was our motivation for founding the Centre of Study of Christianity (CSC) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJ)?*

³ AL 191

As I have said, I grew up at the Rhine. My mother was Dutch, and we children learned from her the Dutch culture and customs. We loved our Dutch family, and we enjoyed the holidays when we traveled across the country in a boat. From our earliest days, we got to know a cordial hospitality and the typical Dutch freedom.

When I think of my father, who had a glorious Rhineland sense of humor, I remember one particular characteristic: namely, the Bible, which he regularly read from beginning to end, both the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament too. That impressed me greatly and awoke a number of questions in me.

But there was another characteristic feature in my life too:

I grew up with three brothers, and I saw no difficulties in the way of my becoming a priest. But as the years passed, I was compelled to learn that this is not a possibility for a woman. Through some biographies, for example of Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, or Edith Stein, who were able in their own days to realize their priestly vocations in a certain sense in their religious orders, I later learned how it is possible today to deal in a different way with this wish, which is not fulfilled, or which cannot be fulfilled as yet.

I likewise got to know great women and men in both Testaments. In the New Testament, I learned how Jesus encountered mature women in the culture of a patriarchal society. It was precisely to them that he communicated the core of our faith, and he commissioned them to proclaim the truth. They belonged to the group of Jesus' disciples. Thanks to the threefold baptismal vocation,⁴ everyone – including women – is called to exercise their healing powers in the diaconal and **priestly** ministry: by accompanying the dying, visiting prisoners and lonely people, preparing the next generation for the faith, and studying the faith more deeply, after receiving an appropriate formation. A woman must never be prevented from carrying out her **prophetic** ministry, because she is one who proclaims. She thinks ahead, and often sends light into the dark tunnel of the church. The **royal** vocation has nothing to do with POTESTAS in the sense of power or official authority. An AUCTORITAS is an authority that demands respect, and to which respect is owed. Its meaning is the precise opposite of domination or subjection.

I believe that 1 Corinthians 1:22–30 is very important, if we are to understand vocation as a service of human beings:

“We proclaim Christ crucified,
a stumbling block to Jews
and foolishness to Gentiles,
but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Thanks to my studies in Louvain and to our Israeli friends, my husband and I came to recognize that these two religions are inseparably linked together. Jesus and his family were genuine sons and daughters of Israel, as were his disciples. The first Christians were all Jews. Peter declared the messianic confession as a believing Jew. Paul strove passionately until the end of his life to form a united community of Jews and Gentiles. After many tough negotiations at the first council in Jerusalem, the ground was laid for the future, with Jews and Gentile Christians as equal members.

⁴ LG 31

But Jews and Christians already parted company after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 of the Common Era. Sadly, the conflicts intensified, and Christian Anti-Judaism made a central contribution to the cruel persecution and annihilation of Jewish men, women, and children. More and more, Jews and Christians became strangers who no longer knew each other.

It was against this background that my husband I felt called in 1989 to travel more frequently to Israel on our holidays, in order to get to know and appreciate our older brothers and sisters. We were both working, but as far as we could, we continued our studies. We deepened our knowledge with every visit we made to the Holy Land, and we let this mature until we could construct, and begin anew, a dialogue between Jews and Christians as children of the one God.

Ten years later, we founded the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I do not have the time here to tell you about everything that happened in this period, and about how the Center made its home at the Hebrew University.

But I find it important to mention that the Faculty of Humanities played a key role in this maturing process. The interdisciplinary approach in the Section for the comparative study of religion was particularly important.

The key words here are studying together and a profound and sincere exchange.

This is why, after we had founded the CSC at the HUJ, we went to Rome in 2000, and founded the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies at the Gregorian University in 2001. An active exchange between the universities in Jerusalem and Rome came into being. It is astounding and delightful today to see this exchange continuing to grow with the young generation.

In this way, we took the vision of the document *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council to a deeper level, and developed it further.

From that time onwards, the Jewish-Christian tradition has made a special mark on our lives. From this area, Joseph Sievers (Rome) und Christian Rutishauser have been able to come here today. Corona means that the Hebrew University was unfortunately unable to attend.

V – A look ahead

In this look ahead, I want to turn especially to the younger generation and to give them encouragement, wherever they may stand in society and the church. On our path, we ought not to serve structures, because they can make us blind as we search for our inner vocation and for what serves human beings. Instead, we should give the priority to sensitivity in the discernment of spirits. What is involved here is the ability to choose consciously out of possibilities. For this, I wish that all of us may be accompanied by good persons who can help us in this area. For in that case, it is the structures that serve us, not the other way round.

In my address here, I have attempted to formulate some of the insights that my husband and I have acquired.

Two Gospel passages motivated us and guided us – and myself:

1.- Luke 20:20–25, the question of paying taxes; and 2. – the Torah commandment of love of neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 and the *regula aurea*, die Golden Rule, in Matthew 7:12.

The question about the imperial taxes in Luke certainly affected us. We read there: “They watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. So they asked, him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ‘Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?’ They said, ‘The emperor’s.’ He said to them, ‘Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” (Lk 20:20–25)

This passage has a clear message for us: Wherever we may be involved in our professional work in our world, whether in business, the social field, politics, the economy, the church, or the family, we should never lose sight of our spiritual ear and eye.

And the second passage that motivates us is the *Torah prayer* and the *regula aurea*.

The Golden Rule runs: “What you do not want to be done to yourself – do not do that to anyone else.” This principle has inspired many people, and it can be found in all the cultures and great thinkers. It may sound simple, but it is highly demanding, if one takes it seriously and seeks to find orientation for one’s life in it – a life in which all are on the path together. And that is a synodal path!

I understand the Synodal Path and the Spirit as a Locus Theologicus.

My concrete question is how the faithful in the dioceses and the episcopal conferences across the whole world are preparing the Synodal Path that Pope Francis has championed from the beginning of his papal ministry. And how will the episcopal world church in Rome in 2023 deal with the most varied topics in such tremendous cultural plurality? What will the discernment of spirits look like, at the end? Will there be space for it?

Permit me to mention a few concerns here that I have long cared about:

First of all, there is the document “*Sensus fidei in the life of the church*” of the International Theological Commission, which explicitly states how important it is for the church to experience the “sense of the faith” and to take the believers – all the believers – seriously. This also means consulting the laity. It is immensely beneficial to the church when we all listen attentively and continuously to the experiences and the concerns of all the baptized! The humble act of listening on every level, and asking advice of those concerned, are integral aspects of a living and vigorous church. This means that every baptized Christian with his or her special vocation in the world has the prerogative of concentrating on his or her *priestly, prophetic, and royal* vocation. And this means that the *sensus fidei* is nothing other than the sensitivity of a believing Christian, which one receives with the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism. John Henry Newman presented this insight with new power. It enabled him to show how the Holy Spirit preserves the entire church in the truth, and at the same time to justify developments in the church’s teaching.⁵

I believe that this means that the priestly formation in seminaries should be put on different foundations.

⁵ This insight was renewed in *Lumen gentium* 12.

The magisterium too “must pay heed to the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the people of God.” This is why Pope Francis speaks of a magisterium that listens and that respects the experiences of pastoral care, which is nothing other than the church’s mother tongue. And if I understand it correctly, this is precisely the wish of the Secretariat of the Synod, which is headed by Mario Grech.

Up to now, Australia, Malta, and Germany have made an important contribution to synodality. Is it conceivable that the German bishops, together with the Central Committee, could invite to their next meeting a larger number of interested bishops and lay persons from other countries? This would make the dimension of the world church even more strongly visible.

The “sense of the faith,” the *sensus fidei* of the believers, is a key concept in theology that is vitally important for the life of the church. The *consensus fidei et fidelium* refers to the consensus of all the believers, and this is an important insight. When we speak of tradition, we must not forget that the faith develops further in the history of the church in every epoch in which we have lived and in which we live. We must not let ourselves be led by fear. While taking things seriously, we must not forget joy! We must deal with the important documents with a cheerful heart.

The fathers of the church already took up this question. What would it mean for us today? The sense of the faith finds its expression in the participation of lay persons at councils and in the election of bishops. Augustine spoke of the “inner teaching office” of Christ. It was taken for granted in the early church that the faithful played a role in the appointment of the bishops: as Leo the Great said, not in 2021, but in his own era (he died in 461): “The one who is to preside [as bishop] over everyone, must also be elected by everyone.”

Finally, the relationships between theology, the church hierarchy, and all the believers – especially the very varied, well-educated young generation – depend on dialogue, a dialogue that also deserves this name. In addition to the theology at universities, we could and ought to work in the church to create a theological legitimation of the principle of dialogue and a culture of dialogue that is mirrored in canon law in the image of the church with its institutional structures. Perhaps there is still too much canonistic-hierarchical and mono-theistic thinking in the church, and too little synodal-trinitarian thinking – in other words, too much institutional thinking, and too little brotherly and sisterly thinking that empathizes with one’s fellow human beings.

With this look ahead, I should like to close my theological-autobiographical reflections and once again express my gratitude.

In particular, I thank the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Bonn and Dean Jochen Sautermeister for this generous award, which I have accepted with gratitude. I shall continue modestly upon my path with the responsibility that this honorary doctorate of theology lays upon me.

I am also grateful to all the listeners for their patience, and to all those who did not shrink from taking a lengthy journey in order to be present at this ceremony, as well as to all those who have told me in writing of their presence. I should also like to thank all those who have contributed in various ways to the successful holding of this ceremony, and especially all those who have accompanied me in my life up to this day.

I THANK you!

Adelgunde Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn