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Your Excellency, dear Chairman of the Uganda Episcopal Conference

Surely you are wondering why you have received this letter from me. To be honest, I am not a big letter writer. In fact, this is my first letter to a bishop and, besides, it is also the first letter I have ever written in a language other than my mother tongue.

What prompted me to write to you is that people from Uganda have got in touch with me and now I am looking for a way to help them. I have the feeling that I, too, have contributed to some of the problems the people in the Southern Hemisphere are facing today. Indeed, I believe that the people and the peoples of the North must take the blame for having caused or at least triggered for a long time many of the current problems.

In the past, I supported Misereor Partnership Projects in Mozambique. Currently, I am supporting a rural development project in Burkina Faso where Christians and Muslims join their efforts to combat desertification (UFC Dori, P11501, <http://www.misereor.org/>).

From my point of view, foreign aid makes only sense if it is asked for. It is not acceptable that people from industrialized countries dictate the route developing countries should take. The people in developing countries are capable of making their own judgements and taking their own decisions and they must find out and determine for themselves which way they want to go.

I am therefore pleased to hear and read of a movement in Uganda that opposes external influences. As an example, our way of life in the North is quite disputable when it comes to sustainability. Also, the decline in social values as solidarity and loyalty taking place in industrialized countries does obviously not provide a model that should be followed.

We in Germany (and probably in Europe as a whole) are currently going through a difficult period of change. During the 1960s, the time of the Second Vatican Council, daily news were full of reports on the developments within the Roman Catholic Church. People were

intensely following the discussions and were confident that the Church would be able to provide answers to their pressing questions.

Today, if you ask young people in Germany about their moral idols they will often name examples outside the Roman Catholic Church: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders, Greenpeace, Attac, The Taizé Community, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, ... Catholic youths will enthusiastically tell you of people that are in conflict with the Roman Catholic Church: For example the determination some bishops in Latin America show in fighting for the rights of the poor inspires young people in Germany probably in a similar manner as Jesus once inspired his disciples when he put the love for God and the love for our neighbor at the core of his message: "... All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40).

You may probably find it hard to follow my descriptions as the situation in Uganda is so totally different from that in Europe. Still, I think it is true that, as far as our situation in Europe is concerned, the very values that are fundamental to our Christian belief often find their expression in a more creditable and intensive manner outside the Roman Catholic Church than within.

I am confident that if we in Europe succeed in focusing our attention also within the Church back towards the basic Christian values, i.e. the love for God and for our neighbor, we will be able to overcome the Church crisis.

An example to illustrate the ongoing development is the perception of homosexuality. Until 1973, homosexuality had been a punishable crime even when experienced between adults in mutual agreement. Today, we have learned from research in the field of psychology that homosexuality is a natural form of human sexuality. Since it is not a trait that is inherited as such to subsequent generations, one should expect that this evolutionary disadvantage would make homosexuality disappear quite promptly from the history of man. Instead, nature has somehow managed to root it as a stable trait in mankind. This is an expression of its substantial value for human society.

The change in the attitude towards homosexuality (from a crime to a disease to a natural variant) has not fully spread throughout the society here in Germany. It is simply a fact that when forming their opinions on such fundamental issues people frequently do not rely on compelling arguments but rather on "a gut feeling" or they adopt traditional notions. It does not help to remind them of the Catechism of the Catholic Church stating that every sign of unjust discrimination of homosexual persons should be avoided (Nr. 2358, Sentence 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P85.HTM).

If we redirect our focus on the love for our neighbor as one of the most fundamental

Christian values, this would imply that one defends homosexual persons wherever they face injustice. In his address to the German Parliament on 22 September 2011, which received much attention, Pope Benedict XVI was given much approval from his audience when he demanded that we should return to respect nature. He illustrated this with the example of the ecological movement. Of course, as far as the evaluation of human sexuality is concerned he has not yet accomplished this refocusing on nature. Given the compelling arguments, however, it seems to me that this is just a matter of time.

I started my letter by telling you that people from Uganda got in touch with me and that I am looking for a way to help them. I have followed reports from Uganda and have learned that newspapers publish pictures of homosexual people on their front pages and call for their murdering. And then some time later, murdered they are. What can you do to defend the rights of these people? What can I tell the people who have asked me for help?

I have also learned that the Parliament is currently debating on life imprisonment of homosexual persons. I have not found any statement on this threatening violation of human rights on the website of the Uganda Episcopal Conference. I am sure it is very difficult to preach love for our neighbor or, even more, to exemplify it by own actions if homophobia has traditionally very strong roots in the population.

From my own experience, I can say that any phobia becomes the more visible the less people know about that what they fear. Until only a few years ago, homophobia had been the prevailing attitude here in Germany. Now, what helped a lot was that there have always been people who had the courage to tell that they were homosexual. This gave homosexuality a face and people became aware that they were afraid of a ghost, of something that did not even exist. Suddenly, it became clear that the stereotypes of gay men had nothing to do with reality. It became clear that the only difference between homosexuals and the rest of the population is that homosexuals love people of the same sex. Violence on one side and love and faithfulness on the other side can be found as often or as rarely with homosexual as with heterosexual people.

Even gay men are usually not beyond holding stereotypes about gays. This makes it difficult for many of them to come out. Often it is a long way to be able to say yes to oneself. The risk of suicide is thus markedly above average among homosexuals.

In the course of our society becoming more open for homosexuals, the impression arises that homosexuality becomes more frequent, i.e. that more and more people become "infected". Homosexuality is then perceived as a danger to marriage and family. This is at least what I hear from some people in Uganda. I can understand their fear but, fortunately, this is a misinterpretation. It is not homosexuality that becomes more frequent, but instead the attitude towards it is getting more and more open-minded and sincere. Our Foreign Minister Guido

Westerwelle, the Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, and the former Mayor of Hamburg, Ole von Beust, are examples of this openness and sincerity.

Within the Catholic Church, a reputable conservative theologian has recently ventured to step into the public. Alas, the determination to make such a move is rather an exception within our Church.

According to my knowledge, the Roman Catholic Church is even far more influential in Uganda than it is here in Germany: More than 40% of the Ugandan people are Roman Catholic (as of the year 2002). In Germany, this proportion has decreased to 30%. And the proportion of people regularly attending a church service is as low as 3.8% (in 2010). What options do you see to help homosexuals in your country to their rights and to social acceptance? The strong Catholic roots in your society add particular weight to your actions.

On the other hand, I am aware that in view of the prevailing social situation this task is a lot more difficult to accomplish in Uganda than it is in Germany. It is likely that it will take huge efforts and a long time to remedy the physical and psychological harm caused by violence and hunger. Considering this, the idea of supporting an unwanted group of people who are more or less invisible (as they are forced to hide themselves) may appear to be rather absurd and unnecessary. This is also true in the parish where I was born in 1965 and where I grew up and am still active today: Lesbians and gays are not visible, they just do not seem to exist. Yet, now I know that they do exist and they suffer from this situation. To change this is not easy, even here, and I presume it is far more difficult in your country. Nevertheless, from the development projects I mentioned above, I know that for us Europeans it is often astonishing to see with how much creativity and stamina the people in Africa are solving their problems.

I would be very glad if you could find answers to my questions and let me know them. In my hometown of Karlsruhe, since 2005, lesbians and gays have been coming together every other month to celebrate an ecumenical church service. We are all very moved by the cry of help that we have recently received from Uganda. We have published it on our website at <http://queergottesdienst-ka.de/uganda.html>. Unfortunately most of this information is currently only available in German, but the original message is published in English. Also many of the links on the website are in English. If you reply to me and your reply is of a private nature and not intended to be published on our website, please state this in your letter. Otherwise, we would publish your reply - which we are all eagerly awaiting - on our website.

Yours sincerely

Markus Müller