

"This is the Victory that Overcomes the World ... our Faith" / (An Essay in Gratitude for the Ministry and Ecumenical Witness of Hans Eberhard Fichtner

BY PRESIDENT FREDERICK R. TROST, WISCONSIN

It was a Tuesday, in April of 1986, shortly before four o'clock in the afternoon. The train left Berlin, heading to the south and east towards the old city of Görlitz. It was in this city that I would be welcomed by the ecumenical officer of the Evangelische Kirche des Görlitzer Kirchengebietes, Oberkonsistorialrat Hans Eberhard Fichtner, a great friend of *Kirchengemeinschaft* between the Evangelical Church of the Union and the United Church of Christ (USA). Hans Eberhard Fichtner was one of those servants of the Word whose ecumenical vision reached high and wide and whose visits to the United States had helped build a foundation for the ecumenical partnership that has developed between our two Churches. The occasion was the installation of the new bishop of the Evangelical Church in Görlitz, Dr. Joachim Rogge.

The train halted in Cottbus and then pressed on towards the Polish and Czech borders, through Weisswasser and Haehnichen, Kodersdorf and Emmrichswalde, Charlottenhof and Uhsmannsdorf. Along the way, I was struck by the sight of the tall birch trees and the lovely evergreen forests, the last of the winter snow melting in the sun, dozens of white-tailed deer feeding in the warmth of the late afternoon, people riding their bicycles along narrow country roads, an occasional power plant, and the many villages in the Ober-Lausitz region of the German Democratic Republic.

Shortly before seven o'clock, the twin spires of the Church of St. Peter and Paul, portions of which date from the years 1220-1230, appeared in the distance. Soon the coaches creaked to a stop and I was met in the train station by this faithful friend of so many years, Hans

Eberhard Fichtner. Hans Eberhard was often the one who met those of us who came from abroad. He and his dear wife, Karin, put us up in their home, fed us, cared for our every need, and did those often invisible deeds that make guests from distant places feel very much at home. There are those who have theorized about the unity of Christ's Church, others who have written thick books about it. Hans Eberhard has been one whose life has embraced it, a brother whose often quiet and gentle, caring acts of kindness enflashed *Kirchengemeinschaft*.

I can still picture the city, dating from the eleventh century, overlooking the Neisse River, seemingly untouched by the ravages of the Second World War. In the *Altstadt*, buildings date back seven centuries to the time the Franciscans arrived in 1234 A.D. to build their cloister and serve among the poor. Görlitz is a city marked even today by numerous towers, the Frauenturm (1305), the Nikolaiturm (1348), the Reichenbacher Tower (1376). The old churches also remain. The nave of the Peterskirche dates from the years 1423-1497, when Luther was still a child and Calvin had yet to see the light of day. One has an awesome sense of history in such places. The Frauenkirche (begun in 1305), the Annenkapelle (1508-1512), and the Nikolaikirche (1516-1520) all bear witness to the truth of the Word made flesh.

The Protestant Reformation came to this region in the early 1520s through the teaching of Franz Rotbart. Those years were marked by strife among the peasants and nobility. One-third of the city of Görlitz is said to have been set afire and burned to the ground. The region became predominantly Lutheran, though some of the princes turned to the Reformed confession around the year 1560. Today, the Evangelical Church in this part of Germany is among the smaller regional communions belonging to the Evangelical Church of the Union. In its midst are congregations of Sorbs (of Czech and Polish origin), who maintain their ancient customs, deeply devoted to Scripture and to Luther's catechisms. Within its boundaries is the famous Herrnhut community where Count Zinzendorf was active and where, from the year 1728 to this day, the famous *Losungen* are published with Bible texts for each day of the Church Year.

Hans Eberhard Fichtner welcomed the many guests who had come to Görlitz in the Spring of 1986 to witness the installation of another friend, Dr. Joachim Rogge (+2000), as bishop. This memorable event took place in the Lutherkirche on Saturday, April 19 (the date in 1560 of the

death of Philipp Melanchthon and in 1529 of the Protest at Speyer). I recall that it was raining hard and it was a cold, grey day. Hans Eberhard scurried around searching for an umbrella or something with which we could cover our heads as the clergy gathered outside the church to begin the procession. As I remember, approximately 1.100 people gathered in the nave of the Lutherkirche and we sang together the words of the hymn by Georg Weissel, "*Grosser Gott, wir loben dich.....*"

The long procession of pastors and other church workers, entered the nave to the festive music of the "*Prelude and Fugue in C major*," by Hans-Leo Hassler and Johann Sebastian Bach. We broke into singing the beautiful hymn "*Preis, Lob und Dank sei Gott dem Herren*," with words by Petrus Herbert (1566) and Samuel Mareschall (1606). Following a motette for two four-voice choirs (based on Psalm 86), the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* were sung by the congregation and choirs in three voices. Prayers were spoken and John 15:1-8 was read. The choir joined with a glorious motette for six-voice choir by Heinrich Schuetz, "*Ich bin ein rechter Weinstock, mein Vater ein Weingaertner*." Dr. Hermann Winde spoke some verses from Romans 15 and asked the new bishop to "accept us as we are,... to be to us a theological guide, pointing us in the way of the gospel, celebrating the sacraments with us, forgiving our sins, serving among us as a teacher. Do not give us what the majority may ask," Dr. Winde said, "neither try to do everything yourself,... but help us simply with... the nets." Then Dr. Winde turned to the congregation and said,... "That things go well in our Church depends not simply on the new bishop, but on us,... pastors and teachers and members of the laity. Therefore, let us ask ourselves if we are prepared to say 'Yes, as God helps me,... as Christ has done,...' let us serve to the glory of God."

In his sermon, Bishop Gottfried Forck of Berlin-Brandenburg, reminded us all that in the history of the Church, as in our own lives,... "the painful times can be times when God blesses us with our neighbors and that the times of persecution have been the times when the Church's witness has been the strongest, and the world has taken note of it. From a human point of view," he said, "the situation facing Paul in the Philippi jail was hopeless,... but then there was the earthquake. If the life of the Church depended only upon our experience, or our ability, it would not be enough... No, the certainty of our faith (in good times and

in bad), comes from the fact that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.' This is true not only for a bishop, but for us all." Looking back, I remember how Hans Eberhard Fichtner always pointed the guests he took into his home to the possibility of a new day coming, when tears would be wiped away and those who remained true to the Gospel would lift up their hearts. We never failed to leave the old city of Görlitz with a sense of hope.

Bishop Rogge spoke of that hope in his sermon, based on 1 John 5:1-4. The sentence, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith," should last us a lifetime, he said, as we live out our beliefs not against the world but for the world." Faith, he proclaimed, "is to share in the victory of Jesus Christ who stands at the side of the weak and of those who have no power." We are called, he went on "to be a serving people, to engage in the ministry of peace..." Peace "is not a program, but a way of life..." Looking back, I am reminded of Abraham Joshua Heschel's observation that there come in life, times to "cry out,..." The vocation of people of faith remains to the end of time to be a serving people, refusing to imprison God our sanctuaries, or to allow the word of God to die on our lips. I think today of friends such as Joachim Rogge and Hans Eberhard Fichtner and Guenther Dressler, and Edith Mueller and Norbert Kruppke and so many others who, in bold words or quiet deeds never lost hope or the ability to "cry out." They helped us to remain "bei der Sache" and to tend to "the nets."

The service that day ended with the "*Te deum laudamus*" and a benediction was spoken. The bells rang out across the ancient city and I was reminded of the words of another servant of the Word, Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador who said: "When we leave worship, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mount Sinai: with one's face shining, with one's heart brave and strong to face the world's difficulties." So it was on that rainy day in Görlitz, on the other side of "the dividing wall of hostility," deep within the Body of Christ, nearly fifteen years ago. And so it remains today as leaders of the holy catholic church such as Hans Eberhard Fichtner have sought to teach us, summoning us in word and deed us to live out our faith,... the "victory that overcomes the world." Thanks be to God!