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## Theology as Congregational Theology. Critical Evaluation of Experiences in Anabaptism

### *Abstract.*

This year we celebrate 500 years of Anabaptism. One of the basic principles of the Anabaptists was their desire to practise theology as congregational theology. It was not the individual theologian and preacher but the congregation as a “discerning community” that was responsible for critically examining how the Word of God should be interpreted and what the theological foundation was to which the faith community should orient itself.

Can we learn from the Anabaptists to practise theology in a way that is true to life and relevant to everyday life? And what would be the outstanding features of this approach that differ from today’s largely academic theology, and could they enrich it? The search for such approaches has broken out worldwide, especially today, since, in the words of the American-Croatian theologian Prof. Miroslav Wolf, university academic theology is suspected of having lost both the academic community in which it arises and the church, its primary customer. Whereas just a few decades ago most pastors were prepared for their ministry at theological colleges, today’s congregations tend to opt for their own young people without theological training when in doubt.

**Keywords:** Anabaptism, discerning community, theological education, congregationalism, pastoral training

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## **1. On Congregational Theology in Anabaptism**

The beliefs of the early Anabaptists were formed within the congregation. The oldest Anabaptist church order dates from the 1520s. This order recommends that believers meet several times a week to read the Word of God together and then apply it to their own lives.<sup>2</sup> The Anabaptists understood the church as a community of followers,<sup>3</sup> who committed themselves to faithfully following Jesus through baptism and communitarian lifestyle (community of goods). And they saw this community as the primary context in which the Bible could be properly understood and interpreted.<sup>4</sup> At the centre of their reading was the person and work of Jesus Christ and thus the Gospel accounts. From this point of view, the Holy Scriptures were understood, since the ultimate goal was to become and live as the Lord was and lived.<sup>5</sup>

Later church ordinances also seem to point in the same direction.<sup>6</sup> However, the first Anabaptist confession of faith, the Schleithem Articles of 1527, does not address the role of the church in theological decision making. Here, responsibility for the purity of doctrine is placed more on the respective elders of the church.<sup>7</sup>

And it was the elders who sought solutions together when differences in attitudes towards marriage and family issues caused divisions in the congregations. In the spring of 1554, seven leading Anabaptists gathered in the city of Wismar to clarify the form of a pure congregation. Among them were Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Leenaert Bouwens, and Gilles von Aachen. The laboriously negotiated decisions of

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<sup>2</sup> HAAS, Martin (ed.) (2008): *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*. Band 3. Zürich, Theologischer Verlag. 487–488.

<sup>3</sup> SNYDER, Arnold C. (1995): *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction*. Kitchener, Pandora. 155.

<sup>4</sup> ROTH, John D. (1994): Community as Conversation. In: Pipki, H. Wayne (ed.): *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*. Elkhart (IN), Institute of Mennonite Studies. 35–50.

<sup>5</sup> See more in: MURRAY, Stuart (1999): *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. Kitchener, Pandora.

<sup>6</sup> Church Ordinances (in Anabaptism). In: *MennLex*.  
<https://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=top:gemeindeordnungen>.

<sup>7</sup> *Schleithem Confession*. Article 6. Available at: [https://www.museum-schleithem.ch/geschichte/taeuerbekenntnis\\_4.htm](https://www.museum-schleithem.ch/geschichte/taeuerbekenntnis_4.htm) (last downloaded on: 10.08.2025).

this elders' convention were presented to the congregations, but they did little to promote unity among them.<sup>8</sup> The dispute, which had already caused tensions among the elders, also spread to the congregations.

In general, the Anabaptists have been a very heterogeneous group since their very beginnings. Today, it is highly probable that there were different sources of this movement.<sup>9</sup> Different wings quickly formed, which were far apart, especially in matters of doctrine. They were all united by their confession of the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith and discipleship, as well as their rejection of infant baptism and higher ecclesiastical power structures. But then there were questions about the Trinity of God, the relationship between the church and the state, the doctrine of the end times, the community of goods, and similar issues that caused divisions and the repeated formation of new churches.<sup>10</sup>

The great authorities among the early Anabaptist leaders, such as Balthasar Hubmeier, Hans Hut, Jakob Hutter, Hans Denk, and Menno Simons, were unable to unite the believers. Even the few confessions of faith, such as the Dordrecht Confession (1632),<sup>11</sup> did not bring unity to the various Anabaptist movements, although their significance for the formulation of basic Anabaptist positions as a whole cannot be overlooked.<sup>12</sup> In a sense, they remained "non-creedal".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> REIMER, Johannes (1996): *Menno Simons: Ein Leben im Dienst*. Lage, Logos Verlag. 83–86.

<sup>9</sup> On questions of origin, see: STAYER, James M. – PACKULL, Werner O. – DEPPERMAN, Klaus (1975): From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins. In: *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. 1975/49: 83–121.

<sup>10</sup> PITTS, Jamie – RUBIO, Luis Tapia (2023): Anabaptist Theology. In: *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*. 8. [first published on 19 October 2023]. Available at: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/AnabaptistTheology>.

<sup>11</sup> For text and impact, see: ROTH, John (ed.) (s. a.): 1632. Dordrecht Confession of Faith. In: *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopaedia Online*. Available at: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht\\_Confession\\_of\\_Faith](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht_Confession_of_Faith) (last downloaded on 9.12.2025).

<sup>12</sup> PITTS – RUBIO 2023, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. 12. On the significance of confessions of faith in various Anabaptist communities in the early centuries, see especially: KOOP, Karl (ed.) (2006): *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660*. Kitchener, Pandora.

Over the centuries, divisiveness repeatedly prevailed among the Anabaptists. Peter M. Friesen, who wrote a history of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren in Russia, called this divisive force a *furor mennonicus*, which, according to Friesen, primarily affected the leadership of the congregations and was ultimately caused by a widespread lack of theological training among Mennonite leaders.<sup>14</sup> Theology arose in the community, which devoted itself to reading the Bible in an effort to follow Christ faithfully in life, and not in the rational reflection of individual theologians.

However, this does not mean that the fathers of the Anabaptist movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century rejected all theological education. After all, the majority of these men were themselves theologically educated and demonstrated their theological competence in relevant theological publications.<sup>15</sup> However, the massive persecution of Anabaptists in both Catholic and Protestant parts of the country led to a complete loss of theological education in the second generation of church leaders. There were hardly any opportunities to study theology academically. On the other hand, deep scepticism towards existing theological education spread among the Anabaptist communities, since it was the pastors trained at such faculties who were their main persecutors. Soon, the Mennonites began to say, “The more learned, the more misguided.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the Anabaptist community had a difficult time with classical theology.<sup>17</sup>

The turning point came with the emergence of Pietism and the missionary movement. Pietist influence led to a spiritual awakening in many Mennonite communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and thus also to a reassessment of the theological training of

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<sup>14</sup> FRIESEN, Peter M. (1911): *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789–1910) im Zusammenhang der mennonitischen*. Halbstadt, Raduga. See the discussion on this topic in: REIMER, Johannes (2008): Between Traditions and Mission: Historical Roots of Russian–German Mennonite Faith Conviction. In: *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. 82, 4. Available at: <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=googlescholar&id=GALE%7CA218190565&v=2.1&it=r&asid=bb63e298> (last downloaded on: 10.08.2025).

<sup>15</sup> BLOUGH, Neal (2025): Theological Education and Anabaptist Identity. Perspectives from Mennonite history. Available at: [https://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal\\_entry/theological-education-and-anabaptist-identity-perspectives-from-mennonite-history/](https://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/theological-education-and-anabaptist-identity-perspectives-from-mennonite-history/) (last downloaded on: 11.08.2025).

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> REIMER, James A. (2001): *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*. Kitchener, Pandora.

leaders.<sup>18</sup> Soon, Mennonites were studying at Pietist Bible schools in Europe and America. But it was not until the twentieth century that evangelical-missionary-oriented Mennonites founded their own theological schools.<sup>19</sup> This brought theologically trained leaders into the congregations. However, the principle of the congregation's ability to make decisions was not abandoned. Educated members of the congregation were still involved in the decision-making process of local congregations. And the election of the respective leader of the congregation is still not tied to the candidate's theological training.

## **2. What Can We Learn from the Anabaptists?**

The Anabaptist churches practised a church constitution that gave absolute priority to the local church assembly in all matters of faith.<sup>20</sup> They and the many free churches that sprang from them have preserved their faith over centuries and through times of severe persecution and have become extremely successful in their missionary work. What distinguishes their theological church education and what can we learn from it today?

First, the Anabaptists were primarily concerned with the right relationship with God and discipleship in everyday life. Hans Denk's famous statement: "No one can truly know Christ unless he follows him in life."<sup>21</sup> summarizes the attitude. Harold S.

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<sup>18</sup> The Mennonites in the Netherlands are the one exception. Here, it was founded as early as 1735. See: KÜHLER, W. J. (1918): *De oprichting van de Amsterdamse kweekschool in 1735*. In: *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*. 55. 43–84; KOOLMAN, Doornkat J. ten – VAN DER ZIJPP, Nanne (1953): *Amsterdam Mennonite Theological Seminary (Kweekschool)*. In: *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 13 August 2025. Available at: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Amsterdam\\_Mennonite\\_Theological\\_Seminary\\_\(Kweekschool\)&oldid=163780](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Amsterdam_Mennonite_Theological_Seminary_(Kweekschool)&oldid=163780).

<sup>19</sup> BLOUGH 2025; FRIEDMANN, Robert (1998): *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries*. Eugene (OR), Wipf & Stock.

<sup>20</sup> EGGENBERGER, Oswald (1990): *Churches, Special Communities, and Religious Associations: A Handbook*. Zurich, Theologischer Verlag Zurich. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from: PEACHY, Paul (1957): *The Modern Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*. In: Hershberger, Guy F. (ed.): *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*. Scottdale, Herald Press. 328.

Bender described Anabaptism in its essence as discipleship.<sup>22</sup> “This concept presupposed the transformation of each member and of society so that it conformed to the teaching and example of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Theological education was thus integrated into the Anabaptists’ concept of discipleship, which in turn was achieved communally within the framework of a brotherhood. This gave the communities identity and strength to survive amid all the persecution. Here, the church today can, indeed must, learn from the Anabaptists.

Second, however, the severe persecution of the Anabaptists soon led to a widespread absence of theologically skilled teachers. As a result, each elder soon developed his own ideas, thereby jeopardizing unity with other congregations. Divisions were the order of the day. This weakened the witness of the congregations in society. It was not until the emergence of Pietism that Bible schools appeared among the Anabaptists, promoting theological competence among leaders and thus also unity among the congregations.

Here, too, Christians can learn from the Anabaptists. The theological training of workers that is limited to the four walls of the local church runs the risk of soon becoming theologically one-sided and therefore potentially sectarian.

### **3. Congregationalism – From the Early Anabaptists to Today**

Today, we associate the Anabaptist church constitution with Congregationalism, which is widespread among Christians. Many free churches, Pentecostal churches, but also the congregational movements that emerged from the Church of England are Congregationalist.<sup>24</sup> They differ greatly in doctrine, church practice, and, above all, in the role they assign to the church in shaping the theology of its members.

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<sup>22</sup> BENDER, Harold S. (1960): *The Anabaptist Vision*. Scottdale, Herald Press. 43.

<sup>23</sup> REIMER, Johannes (2003): Nachfolge – Leben im Gehorsam. In: Klassen, Heinrich – Reimer, Johannes: *Mission im Zeichen des Friedens. Contributions to the History of Anabaptist-Mennonite Mission*. Edition AFEM-Mission Academics. Vol. 14. Lage, Logos Verlag. 49.

<sup>24</sup> SCHMIDT, Martin (1959): Kongregationalismus. In: *RGK*. 3 Auflage. Band 3. Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck. col. 1768ff.

While some have theological faculties, others dispense with any classical university education for their members. And scepticism towards institutionalized theology is spreading rapidly. Talk of a crisis in theological education is already making the rounds.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, fewer and fewer students are attending theological training institutions in Western countries. As a result, a deep crisis in pastoral training is looming on the horizon. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, critics are warning of a “church without priests”.<sup>26</sup> And, strikingly enough, alternatives are being sought, as evidenced by a growing number of concerned church leaders, in the model of community-based theological training – training such as the one practised by the Anabaptists.

The question is whether the practice of the Anabaptists and the many Christian communities that are shifting theological training and the education of their workers to the local congregation can solve the problem facing the West today.

What is causing this crisis? Why is institutionalized theology losing its appeal? Or is the pastoral profession itself under pressure? Is the crisis even an expression of a much deeper crisis in the nature of theology and theological education itself, as Croatian-American theologian Miroslav Volf asks very pointedly whether theology and theologizing have not long since lost sight of God himself?<sup>27</sup> After all, theology is nothing more than a conscious commitment to God and his concerns, as Jürgen Moltmann so aptly put it: “It is simple and yet true that theology has only one problem—God. We are theologians for God’s sake. God is our dignity. God is our agony. God is our hope.”<sup>28</sup>

Is God the real centre of our theological education in Euro-America? Is Moltmann’s theorem true for us? Or are other topics determining the theological discussion?

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<sup>25</sup> See an overview in: REIMER, Johannes (2024): Theology in Crisis – Ways into the Future. In: *Evangelical Focus* 24 September. Available at: <https://evangelicalfocus.com/features/28355/theology-in-crisis-ways-into-the-future>; GRAF, Friedrich Wilhelm (2008): Tumult im Theotop: Akademische Theologie in der Krise. In: *FAZ* 21 February. 8; SMITH, Ted A. (2023): *The End of Theological Education*. Grand Rapids (MI), Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

<sup>26</sup> EBERL, Jens (2024): Kirche ohne Priester. In: *Tagesschau*. 28 May. Available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/gesellschaft/priestermangel-katholische-kirche-100.html>.

<sup>27</sup> VOLF, Miroslav (2003): *Dancing for God: Evangelical Theological Education in Global Context*. Lecture from 18 August 2003, held at the ICETE International Consultation for Theological Educators, High Wycombe, UK.

<sup>28</sup> MOLTSMANN, Jürgen (1995): *Theology and the Future of the Modern World*. Pittsburgh, ATS. 1.

Of course, here too we cannot do without a reference to God. But is it primarily about God or rather about issues of religious practice? What do our students learn about God or the issues surrounding the question of God?

“Have you grown closer to God in the five years of your theological studies, have you learned to love him even more, and have you deepened your personal fellowship with him?” – I was asked after the end of my own theological studies.

Admittedly, the question seemed very strange to me and I replied, “I have learned to understand the Bible better, to distinguish better between theological convictions, I have understood the doctrinal positions of my church and learned to justify them in the Holy Scriptures, and much more. It was always somehow about God. But when asked specifically whether my relationship with God has improved qualitatively, well, I haven’t thought about that yet.”

Between you and me, no, it had not improved. Somehow, my studies were also about God. But my relationship with Him was only a marginal topic, in the subject Spiritual Formation. At best, it had remained the same. Quite unlike some of my fellow students who had lost their faith during their studies. What had I studied then? Theology, or rather religious studies? With Miroslav Volf, I very much suspect it was more religious studies for long stretches.<sup>29</sup> The missing God in modern days’ theology is probably the deepest cause of the crisis in theological education and, with it, ultimately, Christians’ life of faith. Theology would have been concerned with God, with his place in the life and faith of Christians, whereas religious studies dealt with the religion lived and believed in.

Of course, it was about my religion, about the Christian faith, which turns to the Triune God. That is correct. But was it about God? I first noticed this connection when I was writing my popular book *Church Works* and asked Christians about the ten most important factors that made up their life of faith in the church.<sup>30</sup> I received all kinds of interesting answers, but God was virtually absent from their list. Yet the faith of Jesus’s church is first and foremost about HIM, our Lord and God, is it not?

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<sup>29</sup> VOLF 2003, 2.

<sup>30</sup> REIMER, Johannes (2016): *Gemeinde geht: 10 Faktoren effektiver Gemeindegemeinschaft*. Marburg, Francke Verlag.



I then looked critically at my own sermons and, above all, lectures and seminars at the theological college. I even asked the students to judge from the lecture notes what my lecture said about God. And experienced the same effect. My students only found indirect references to God. Unnoticed, I myself had followed the same trend that I am criticizing here.

Here, in the practical absence of God in the teaching content of theology, lays probably the deepest cause of the crisis in theological education and, with it, ultimately, Christians' life of faith. Where the most important things are no longer the most important things, topics of the day quickly take over, displacing the most important things from the curriculum of the theological faculties and replacing them with urgent topics of the *zeitgeist*.

We learn who God is in the actual doctrine of God in systematic theology, as one might quickly reply to my criticism here. And the latter gains its insights from the exegesis of Holy Scripture and its historical reflection in the history of the Church. Correct. I can only say that. And in practical theology, in preaching and pastoral care, evangelization and mission, we try to apply what we have learned in dogmatics. Or do we not? That is exactly what our curriculum prescribes.

A learned doctrine is transferred into everyday life. If only this everyday life was not constantly changing. The transfer only succeeds all too rarely, and the newly trained theologian fails at the first challenges of his everyday parish life.

The result is pastoral fatigue, burnout, and increasing flight from the pastoral professions. Is it due to inadequate training of pastors? Is something essential being overlooked? People have been talking about the crisis in the pastoral ministry for years. And the complaints can be heard from Europe and America, as well as from faraway Australia.<sup>31</sup>

The cases of pastors who have stumbled over their moral failures will soon be too numerous to count. Names like Bill Hybels, Ravi Zakharias, and Mark Driscoll stand for many other Protestant and Catholic ministers who have had to resign as a result of their lifestyle. Mark Farnham even speaks at this point of the crisis of pastoral virtue.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ORR, Peter (2022): The Crisis Facing our Pastors. In: *Crossway* 18 November.

<sup>32</sup> FARNHAM, Mark (2022): Crisis of Pastoral Virtue. In: *Shepherds Corner* 360. 14 July.

Pastors receive their ministry calling from the hand of God. Their ministry is carried out in the name and on behalf of God. He himself assures them of his support. However, if they leave the framework of their calling and abandon their relationship with God, crisis is almost inevitable.<sup>33</sup> Jana Jičínská emphasizes that the crisis of the pastorate, despite all the difficulties of the context in which spiritual leaders have to carry out their ministry, is also a question of the frightening coldness in the relationship between the pastor and his master. And this coldness seems to stem directly from the crisis in theological education that these pastors have experienced. She writes:

Spiritual life is absolutely crucial for pastoral workers. Growing into Christ and following him brings the strength to handle all difficulties, crises, or doubts in a different perspective. Jesus empowers his servants by strengthening them, bestowing gifts and graces. It supports maturity and stress management. It frees from addictions and the Evil One. Christian service is an extraordinary area of the Holy Spirit's action and its manifestation in various services. Pastoral care is not psychology or psychotherapy but offers Jesus and his salvation, which transforms and heals human beings.<sup>34</sup>

God's far-reaching concrete absence in theology results in the factual absence of God in the pastor's life and ministry. Even the simple question of when the Lord last spoke directly in the pastor's life causes a clueless shrug of the shoulders here in Germany.

I often hear the sentence: "We are not charismatics, we listen to the Holy Scriptures and not to voices from the beyond." Of course, crises are also always opportunities. And so the crisis of the pastorate was already recognized as an opportunity for the church in 1995.<sup>35</sup> The renewal of the pastorate will potentially lead to the renewal of the church. It is no coincidence that people have been complaining for years about the crisis in theological studies.

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<sup>33</sup> BALDWIN, Jennifer (2018): *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*. New Jersey, Cascade. 157.

<sup>34</sup> JIČÍNSKÁ, Jana (2024): Crisis in the Life of Professionals in Pastoral Ministry. In: *Theology and Philosophy of Education*. 3, 1. 51. Available at: <https://philarchive.org/archive/JINCIT-2> (last downloaded on 9.12.2025)

<sup>35</sup> DUBIED, P. (1995): *Die Krise des Pastorats als Chance für die Kirche*. Zurich, Theologischer Verlag.

Calls for the reform of theological studies have been correspondingly loud. Obviously, the two crises are interdependent. How can the lessons learned from the history of Anabaptism help us to solve the crisis? And can any help be found in it at all?

#### **4. Theology with Intention**

The Anabaptists practised their theology in the interest of consciously following Christ. They sought to understand Jesus in order to emulate him in their teaching and lives. And they did so as a brotherhood of His devoted disciples. God was the real focus of their theology! And this was at the centre of His church. Theology was thus part of church life. And theology was not detached from practical discipleship. Here we can truly learn from the Anabaptists.

But we can and should also be wary of simply transferring theological education to the church, as the Anabaptists largely did. Adequate theological reflection requires a level of competence that presupposes special study. The church of Jesus cannot do without its Bible schools and seminaries. But these must be realigned so that they promote the church of Jesus's disciples.

Throughout my long life as a theologian, I have held together with the German theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984), who said of himself that he practised theology for the practice of faith.

Karl Rahner wrote, "*I have always practiced theology for the sake of proclamation, for the sake of preaching, for the sake of pastoral care—in other words, for the sake of faith.*" He then continues: "*I'm not a scientist and I don't want to be one, but I want to be a Christian who takes Christianity seriously, who lives unbiasedly in today's world and from there allows himself to be given this or that and a third and a twentieth problem to think about; if you want to call that 'theology', that's fine.*"<sup>36</sup>

Rahner, one of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, did not want to be a theologian who served a science. He served his Lord Jesus Christ. He was concerned with God in his life and in the lives of his fellow human beings. And it was from here that he developed his discourse on God, his theology in preaching and pastoral care.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.jesuiten.org/news/karl-rahner-1>.

Is that what made his theology so quick-witted, his words so convincing? I think so. In Rahner's life, God remained the most important thing, and all the questions that life posed to him were discussed from this central point. He reflected on life and ministry theologically, in the best sense of the word.

And his theology attracted crowds. There was no need to fear empty halls during his lectures. There was no need to fear a crisis in theology around Rahner – quite different from the situation in many places today. Lecture halls here are characterized by yawning emptiness. And the faculties are faced with the question of how long their programme can continue to exist.

Can we hope for a future? You bet! But the condition is clear – our education today needs theologians, theologians who, like my great role model, Rahner, practise theology from a living relationship with God in the midst of a discerning community of believers.

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