

5. Catholicity: A Hermeneutic Model for Intercultural Theological Ethics?

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl

When significant questions bearing on human life and society arise, intercultural theological ethics is regularly exposed to the criticism that it shifts to an “exotic” or relativistic position. It is alleged that intercultural theological ethics trifles in a detached manner with approaches which allude to various cultural backgrounds without subjecting them to critical judgment. Yet, it is the conviction that (cultural) plurality is not to be valued for its own sake but rather enables serious and (self-)critical learning processes, which lie at the heart of the social and intellectual model we call “catholicity.” Indeed, we have here a mode of living and thinking that is distinct, both from a hegemonically uniform way of thinking and equally from the type of relativism which leaves each position and tradition to its own devices. Acknowledging that the “catholicity” proposed here represents an idealized model, one which exists only partially in real-life Catholicism, this chapter suggests that “catholicity” be used as a hermeneutic model of intercultural theological ethics. In support of this thesis, the chapter will (1) clarify the understanding of “interculturality” and (2) examine the concept of “catholicity” in light of the Second Vatican Council, in order to (3) indicate options for a continuing development of theological ethics within the context of the universal church.

“Interculturality”—from the “Sphere Model” to the Multivocal Learning Experience

The term “interculturality [Interkulturalität]” has been in regular use within the German-speaking world since the 1980s, especially in philosophical and theological publications. Journals and societies for

intercultural philosophy¹ have been set up, intercultural theology institutions have been established, and existing journals have been renamed.² Within the philosophical field this project stressed that philosophy does not simply equate to European or North American thought but—as a project involving the whole human race, not just a single language or school of thought—gathers its arguments, terminology, inspirations, and so on from numerous traditions. It was with this in mind that the Viennese philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer formulated his “minimum rule” of intercultural philosophy: “Do not expect a philosophical thesis to be well-founded if its originators stem from just a single cultural tradition.”³ Where theology is concerned, “interculturality” means that in principle the Christian faith can be expressed in, and translated into, any and every cultural or social context: “Intercultural theology deals with the interaction between Christian faith and the cultural-religious pluralism in which it participates.”⁴ Here Volker Küster makes it clear that “interculturality” is not an “exotic” affair, but embodies normal life in a universal church. Intercultural theology originated towards the end of the twentieth century because cultural and religious plurality had become inevitable in European countries,⁵ necessitating appropriate theological reflection.

However, the impression was that the questions and ideas dealt with by intercultural theology have nothing to do with “actual” theology in the main, and “interculturality” was perceived as a term that rather vaguely

¹ *Polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren* (polylog.net), the (German) Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Philosophie GIP (int-gip.de) and the Wiener Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Philosophie WIGIP (wigip.org).

² For example, from issue 34 (2008) onward the “*Zeitschrift für Mission*” was renamed “*Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*.” At the time this name change was justified as follows: “Intercultural Theology” focuses on the reciprocal effects resulting from the dialogue between theologies from different contexts, and from reflection on different cultural traditions and patterns” (Madeleine Strub-Jaccoud, Dieter Becker and Benedict Schubert, “Ein neuer Name,” *Interkulturelle Theologie. Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 34, no. 1 (2008): 4.

³ Franz M. Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung* (WUV, 2004), 51.

⁴ Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 15.

⁵ Werner Ustorf, “The Cultural Origins of Intercultural Theology,” in *Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes*, ed. M. J. Cartledge and D. Cheetham (SCM Press, 2011), 11–28.

described encounters with “alien cultures” (often including non-Christian religions). “Interculturality” was used to some extent as a blanket term for alterity, foreignness and anything culturally unfamiliar in theology and church, politics and society. Similarly, intercultural theological ethics runs the risk of being regarded as a form of ethics dealing with challenges in “alien contexts” rather than as an attempt to reflect on courses of action, norms, and issues of daily life in light of social and cultural plurality. Accordingly, it is important to arrive at a more precise definition of “interculturality.”

One helpful starting point is provided by Judith Schlehe’s differentiation between multi-, inter-, trans- and hyperculturality. *Multiculturalism* refers to the facticity of cultural plurality, without evaluating it normatively. In any given society, city, or region there are people who belong to different cultural traditions.⁶ Admittedly, the recognition of this plurality tends to bring about a “cementing of collective identities and differences in an unconnected juxtaposition,”⁷ as various critics have pointed out.

Interculturality, by contrast, aims to provide for encounter, exchange, and reciprocal challenge. “The Others” are not simply a social and cultural reality. They have something to say to me, they make me think, and I can learn something from them, which applies the other way round as well. It is a matter of interaction between human beings with different cultural mentalities. One criticism frequently leveled at this concept of interculturality is that it presupposes an essentialist model of “cultures” that interact by colliding with each other like balls. This criticism is rendered invalid by the fact that “interculturality” is not necessarily associated with a concept of fixed cultures, as claimed by Samuel Huntington in his thesis in *The Clash of Civilizations*,⁸ but can work just as comfortably with open and

⁶ This renders the polemic against “multiculturalism,” as expressed by right-wing populist groups, entirely spurious, on the grounds that “multiculturalism,” as a straightforward social given, holds no political position.

⁷ Judith Schlehe, “Kultureller Austausch,” in *Handbuch interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz. Grundbegriffe—Theorien—Anwendungsfelder*, ed. J. Straub, A. Weidemann and D. Weidemann (Metzler, 2007), 456.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

differentiated theories of culture. In a nutshell, interculturality should be conceived of as discursive, not identitarian.⁹

While interculturality aims for dialogue and exchange, *transculturality* strives to open up to all participating cultures a common space in which something new can emerge—something which goes beyond the identity of individual cultures. This is the emphasis adopted by migration research, with its focus on the formation of urban life-worlds. As Wolfgang Welsch stresses, “Transculturality penetrates not only the social macro-level, but equally the individual micro-level. In their cultural formation, people are determined increasingly by *several* cultural origins and connections. . . . Contemporary cultural identity is a patchwork identity.”¹⁰

Finally, *hyperculturality* represents the experiences of a digital globalization in which there are no longer any transitions between cultural spaces but simply—according to Judith Schlehe, drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han—“a global Here.”¹¹ In contrast to transculturality, hyperculturality rejects any remaining significant associations with “culture.” Indeed (and this is not a feature of “hyperculturality”) real globalization is characterized by concrete—perhaps even rigid—economic, political, and material standards.

⁹ See the typology of Andreas Reckwitz, who distinguishes between four concepts of culture: (1) the *normative* concept, which views a particular lifestyle as preeminent and worth striving for; (2) the *holistic* concept, which describes the sum total of a collective (of a “nation”); (3) the *differentiation-theoretical* concept, which calls attention to a subsystem within a society (often in relation to the arts); and (4) the *meaning- and knowledge-oriented* concept, which regards culture as a symbolic order, as a system of meaning and a knowledge order in accordance with which human activity is oriented (*Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien. Zur Entwicklung eines Theorieprogramms*, 2nd ed. [Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006], 64–90). Hence, if interculturality is perceived in terms of the first or second of Reckwitz’s concepts of culture, then the charge of being a “sphere model” is justified; in terms of the fourth concept, however, we are dealing with an exchange between different symbol systems. What is more, not only are these systems in collision with each other, the challenge they present is a confrontation between systems of meaning and orders of knowledge that are almost entirely alien.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Welsch, “Transkulturalität,” in *Intercultural Discourse: Key and Contested Concepts*, ed. M. Kirloskar-Steinbach, G. Dharampal-Frick and M. Friele (Karl Alber Verlag, 2012), 148.

¹¹ Schlehe, “Kultureller Austausch,” 456.

If we take this differentiation into account, it becomes more apparent that “interculturality” refers not to a clash between clearly demarcated cultural identities in an essentialist or identitarian sense but to a complex learning process involving an exchange between people from different cultural, religious, and/or social backgrounds. Accordingly, “intercultural philosophy” entails not the study of “exotic” philosophies which seem furthermore to be “exclusively territorial” (as if there is such a thing as “*the* Eastern philosophy” or “*the* African philosophy”)¹² but rather an openness and a willingness to expect philosophical debate to offer stimuli, inspiration, and learning opportunities from within each and every tradition. Ethics as a philosophical discipline reflecting on human activity—not purely by documenting how people really act but also by setting out arguments as to why someone should act in a specific way¹³—functions interculturally when its analysis of the arguments surrounding moral actions and judgments draws on different cultural traditions and thereby gains new insights. Ethical approaches from other cultures and societies are not necessarily better or worse, but they can play their part in achieving new perspectives and enhancing one’s own point of view. And last but not least, intercultural theological ethics regards itself as a form of theological ethics which, on the basis of Christian religious practice and critical reasoning, develops an ethical argumentation in dialogue with different ideas, plausibilities, and cultures. If the Christian faith is convinced that the message of the Gospel is a “call to freedom to the whole human race”¹⁴ that it is not merely the imposition of a moral system on humanity but

¹² See the critical observation by Gregor Paul, who maintains, as one of the basic methodological rules of intercultural philosophy, that “terms such as ‘German philosophy’ and ‘East’ and ‘West’ should only be used as mere abbreviations for ‘a philosophy developed and/or formulated in Germany’ or ‘a philosophy developed and/or formulated in Asia (and/or in an Asian language).” Gregor Paul, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Philosophie* (WBG, 2008), 36.

¹³ This is based on the dual meaning of the Greek *ethos* and the Latin *mos* (from which the German word “moral” and the English words “moral/morality” are derived). This dual meaning denotes both “habit, custom, usage” and “character, virtue”—i.e., not a purely factual “moral principle” but also the *virtue* worth striving for. Annemarie Pieper, *Einführung in die Ethik*, 6th ed. (Francke, 2007), 24–30.

¹⁴ Franz Böckle, *Fundamental moral*, 2nd ed. (Kösel-Verlag, 1978), 161.

represents “the fulfilment of humanity’s deepest expectations,”¹⁵ then theological ethics cannot pass up the opportunity to discover fresh lines of reasoning and insights from within different cultural resources. Succinctly, intercultural theological ethics is distinctive for its serious efforts to engage in dialogue with different cultural positions (including those that are alien and perhaps even puzzling) with a view to learning from them and relinquishing Eurocentric perspectives. But what are the possibilities and models available when we seek to practice an intercultural attitude in the context of theological thinking?

Catholicity: the *Character Universalitatis*

The term “catholicity” is normally associated with a specific Christian denomination, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. So if one is “Catholic” that would mean one belongs to a specific church. One is not Orthodox or Protestant, for example. In addition to this *denominational* meaning of “catholic” however, there is a *systematic theological* meaning connected with the original sense of the Greek word. “*Katholou*” is made up of *kat(h)a* (with regard to, in accordance with, etc.) and *holon* (the entirety—retained in the English word “whole”) and it means “with regard to the whole.” This meaning of the ancient Greek word has nothing to do with religion but relates to what is general, “whole,” fundamental.¹⁶ So in the systematic theological sense “catholic” does not mean a specific denomination but refers to the conviction that the Christian message is addressed in principle to all human beings (thus by definition not excluding anyone) and relates to the whole human person, not just to some aspects of human life.¹⁷ In this context, the theologian Yves Congar, who carried out important preliminary work for the Second Vatican Council,

¹⁵ Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*, 289.

¹⁶ See “καθόλου,” in *Griechisch-deutsches Schul- und Handwörterbuch*, 9th ed. (Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1965), 399.

¹⁷ Yves Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” in *Mysterium Salutis. Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, Band IV/1: Das Heilsgeschehen in der Gemeinde* (Benzinger, 1972), 357–594, 485.

spoke of a “qualitative catholicity”¹⁸ of the relation of church life to the fullness of the Gospel. In this sense, every Christian church that relates to the whole Christian faith is “catholic” (bearing in mind that no individual church can manifest the Gospel in all its fullness). Whereas a sect takes seriously only one aspect of the reality of human life, a church which meets the challenge of “catholicity” takes on the whole of life, of the human race and of the world.¹⁹

The following observations focus on the systematic theological meaning of “catholicity,” without losing sight of the denominational sense of the term.²⁰ The Second Vatican Council developed a noteworthy theology of catholicity which remained unrecognized for a long time. Whereas the post-conciliar debate was frequently trapped in a polarization between criticism and defense of denominational Catholicism, in recent years there has been an increase in awareness of the potential concealed in the concept of “catholicity” and of the extent to which “catholicity” as a way of thinking and a social structure can offer a hermeneutic model for communicating the Gospel in today’s world.

In the Preface to the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), there is already a focus on wholeness and universality as the hallmark of catholicity. The church perceives itself as “a community of people” who are the “bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity” (no. 1).²¹ So, to be catholic in this sense means to proclaim the message of faith, not only in one’s own milieu but to *everyone*, including those whom the church finds it difficult to deal with, whose way

¹⁸ Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” 487.

¹⁹ Congar, “Die Wesenseigenschaften der Kirche,” 491.

²⁰ When considering the denominational meaning of “Catholic” it is also important to recall that (1) this meaning only came into existence at the Reformation in the sixteenth century as Roman Catholicism following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), and that (2) alongside the Roman Catholic Rite there are a number of other rites, including the Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic and Chaldean Catholic Rites. It is not uniformity, therefore, that is typical of and essential to “Catholicism,” but rather, ritual diversity and cultural plurality.

²¹ Conciliar documents are quoted from Vatican Council II, *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, 2014).

of thinking and acting it only partly understands, and whose culture and mentality it finds unfamiliar. But catholicity has not only a *quantitative* but also, as Congar had pointed out, a *qualitative* dimension. It concerns the whole human being. “It is the human person that is to be saved, human society which must be renewed. It is the human person, therefore, which is the key to this discussion, each individual human person in her or his totality, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 3). Faith addresses not just a cognitive or spiritual or emotional dimension but the whole person. So a “catholic” attitude cannot gloss over certain aspects and dimensions of human life but takes seriously the whole human person with all his or her experiences. Purely on the basis of the attitude described in the Preface to *Gaudium et Spes*, it is obvious that the church is there *for all humanity* and is oriented towards the *whole human person*; it is to live out a quantitative and qualitative catholicity.

The specific logic underlying this catholicity is discussed in the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 13). This passage of text sounds thoroughly traditional, yet it develops a new and remarkable perspective on human coexistence; the following five points summarize the text of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13 and explain the new logic underlying catholicity.²²

1. The beginning and end of the chapter set out a commitment to quantitative catholicity—yet not in the sense of a strategy for recruiting as many people as possible into a religious community, but as an attitude of openness towards all people in principle: “All women and men are called to belong to the new people of God.” And at the end there is an even clearer statement: “All are called to this catholic unity of the people of God which prefigures and promotes universal peace.” The point at issue is not that everyone should become a member of the Catholic Church, but rather that to be a Christian Church means opening ourselves up to all

²² All the following citations relate to *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

people—just as Christ called people and gathered them together, irrespective of predetermined boundaries.

2. While this message, “The one people of God is accordingly present in all the nations of the earth, and takes its citizens from all nations, for a kingdom which is not earthly in character but heavenly,” sounds somewhat pious and self-evident, its emphasis is quite distinctive. Cultural affiliations are not sacrificed to the church (as if one must demolish one’s cultural traditions in order to become a Christian) but are brought into the church community, since faith can, in principle, be linked with every culture and society. What matters is not a “Christian culture” but the community of the church, to which everyone is called, along with their cultures.²³ So, being catholic does not mean propagating a “Christian culture”; it means being capable of engaging with different cultural traditions and of proclaiming, living out, and interpreting the Christian faith “multi-culturally.”
3. For the church community, the people of God, the source of its life is a gift received “from the Lord himself”: *universality*—in the original Latin, the *universalitatis character*. This gift has an incredible attribute: it empowers the church “to recapitulate the whole of humanity and all its riches under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit.” Accordingly, the *universalitatis character* liberates a radically inclusive dynamic. In and through Christ, the whole human race, with all its treasures, is “brought together,” recapitulated. Here, no. 13 quotes the early Christian theologian

²³ There are similar statements in the “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” (*Ad Gentes*); see for instance no. 8: “Both Christ and the church which bears witness to him transcend the distinctions of race and nationality, and so cannot be considered strangers to anyone or in any place.” *Ad Gentes*, no. 21, emphasizes that in “witness to Christ” what is at stake is not a culture but “newness of life,” which people experience through baptism and faith: “They must give expression to this newness of life in their own society and culture and in a manner that is in keeping with the traditions of their own land.”

Irenaeus of Lyons, who declared in the second century that through Christ the whole human race would be restored and, in effect, renewed, united, and empowered. So being “catholic” means entering the service of this uniting, empowering, and renewing dynamic of the Gospel.

4. It is particularly exciting to appreciate how no. 13 views the cooperation between different people and traditions within the church as a whole. The relationship between local churches and the universal church is not envisaged—as one might expect—as being directly proportional (“the more universal the church, the less local the church”) but indirectly proportional: “In virtue of this catholicity, each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the entire church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to achieve fullness in unity.” This “catholic proportionality” differs fundamentally from nationalist concepts, which always view the “whole” as a threat to the “particular,” so that the greater the universality, the less the locality—and vice versa—a logic that is currently common worldwide. Not so in no. 13: the more locality, the better it is for universality/catholicity. So, to be “catholic” is not a matter of who imposes universal unity on local regional churches but rather of who views the gifts of local churches as gifts for the universal church and at the same time regards the global level of the universal church as strengthening the local churches.
5. Ultimately, this indirectly proportional relationship between universality and contextuality corresponds to the fifth and final aspect of catholicity as affirmed in no. 13: the conviction “that the people of God is not only an assembly of different peoples, but in itself is made up of various ranks.” Here there is explicit reference to the role of the papal office or Petrine ministry as a global

communicator; what is intended is not the conformity of the local churches but a lively exchange between global unity and local particularity: “There are, legitimately, in the ecclesial communion particular churches which retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the Chair of Peter, which presides over the entire assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not diminish unity, but rather contribute to it.” It is not appropriate to compare catholicity with an international business group which controls its branches across the world from a central head office. Rather, it is like a network that enables good cooperation by means of global interconnectedness and local variations. It goes without saying that there are tensions and conflicts; the universal church is not a harmonious club. However, it does make a difference whether the “church” as a social system follows a centralistic, identitarian logic, or a “catholic” one which allows unity at a global level and diversity at a local level, leading to mutual strengthening, not conflict.

Lumen Gentium, no. 13 points the way towards a type of “catholicity” that can serve as a hermeneutic model for human life together²⁴ and for intellectual debate on the themes of unity and plurality. So which churches, social systems, or intellectual approaches can be called *catholic*—in the *systematic theological*, not the denominational, sense of the word? Those which

²⁴ See the equally little-known document “*Ecclesia in Europa*” (John Paul II, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*. On Jesus Christ Alive in his Church. The Source of Hope for Europe,” June 28, 2003, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html), in which Pope John Paul II, in addition to many other noteworthy and bold initiatives (on the issue of migration, for example), proposed the principle “catholicity” as the model for a new Europe: “One and universal, yet present in the multiplicity of the Particular Churches, the Catholic Church can offer a unique contribution to the building up of a Europe open to the world. The Catholic Church in fact provides a model of essential unity in a diversity of cultural expressions, a consciousness of membership in a universal community which is rooted in but not confined to local communities, and a sense of what unites beyond all that divides.”

- are open to the plurality of cultural traditions and the totality of human experience, without losing their awareness of the universal,
- understand the connection between what is human and cultural on the one hand and what is Christian on the other, not as a competitive relationship, but as one that presents a challenge,
- mediate between universality and contextuality in such a way that learning experiences can take place at both levels.

Thus, “catholicity” can serve as a hermeneutic model²⁵ first and foremost where interculturality and globality/contextuality are at issue, such as in the dynamic analysis being undertaken by intercultural theological ethics. A “hermeneutic model” is not a “user manual” and is no guarantee of successful comprehension and translation. However, in contrast both to an identitarian logic (“Everything must be the same”) and to a relativistic attitude (“Why should we care what other people do or think?”), it gives us courage to embark on a learning process. Otherwise, how can the universal church acquire new knowledge and further insights? Not to mention the fact that for the Catholic Church itself the principle of “catholicity” continues to present an ongoing challenge which it can never fully meet; church and theology are constantly called afresh to see the “complete picture.”

²⁵ If hermeneutics means “to put into words (express), expound (explain), and translate (interpret),” then a “hermeneutic model” must set an example for the successful communication of meanings. Gerhard Ebeling, “Hermeneutik,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 3, ed. K. Galling, 3rd ed. (Mohr, 1959), 243.

Intercultural Theological Ethics: On the Path to New Learning Processes in Church and Society

To propose “catholicity” as a hermeneutic model for intercultural theological ethics does not imply that the Catholic Church possesses some kind of epistemological privilege nor yet that the “complete picture” will provide unambiguous solutions to ethical problems. Instead, it is about seeing catholicity as a form of interculturality which enables reciprocal learning processes and regards unity and diversity, globality, and particularity within a religious community as mutually inspiring (not competitive) poles of a circuit. Whatever individual local churches, in their specific cultural and social situations, can contribute from their understanding of theological ethics will be of interest to the church as a whole, since they introduce concrete problems that might be overlooked at a global level. Conversely, the perspective of the universal church can challenge local churches to see their theory and practice of ethical approaches in a wider context. Intercultural theological ethics envisages a global and local communication process of learning and transformation since the situations of other local churches in other societies can have something important to say to its own position. No culture, no local church has a monopoly on the meaning of the Gospel, and no one has privileged access to a theological ethics which then has to be explained to “the Others.” We are all invited to engage with “alien” concepts of theological ethics. It is precisely this which is the essence of intercultural theological ethics.²⁶

It is clear that intercultural theological ethics cannot be reconciled with a Eurocentric perspective on theology and the church, and certainly not

²⁶ See the “Synthetic Model” proposed by the missiologist and theologian Stephen B. Bevans, which has three models: Translation, Anthropology, and Praxis: “The synthetic model reaches out to the resources of other cultures and other theological expressions for both the method and content of its own articulation of faith. In this way a synthesis develops between one’s own cultural point of view and the points of view of others.” Stephan Bennet Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books, 1992), 82–83.

with a neocolonial approach which reinforces structures of dependence and power between the Global North and South. But neither does it represent some kind of exoticism which regards an ethical concept as automatically good just because it originates from an alien culture. Disparagement of European theology and ethics is certainly not the point of intercultural theological ethics. Rather, it aims to awaken interest in theological exchange with colleagues from other parts of the universal church. What is required for this is an ability to translate theological arguments appropriate to a specific cultural plausibility into other theological “languages,” as well as the courage not to sidestep conflict. For instance, there is tension between the countries of the Global North and the Global South when it comes to contributions to tackling the climate crisis; environmental ethics are affected by the analysis of the causes and consequences of global warming, which are unequally distributed around the world. Questions surrounding relationship and sexual ethics give rise to even greater conflict, given that Catholic theology in Africa offers answers that differ from Catholic theology in Europe. The issue of homosexuality appears to represent an irreconcilable contradiction within the universal church community of every Christian church; intercultural theological ethics will not be able to find quick solutions with which all theologians within the universal church will agree. But even when it comes to this “hot potato” in the field of theological ethics, we are all invited to reconsider our own convictions in accordance with “catholic” logic and in the light of the greater whole. We are bidden to listen to possible insights from others who hold different points of view. If Christian theology believes that the Spirit of God is at work in all cultures and if theologians in different social contexts are seriously engaged in “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4), then tensions and misunderstandings can form part of a laborious learning process, an “intellectual synodality” which can lead to a new, (self-)critical, and more conscientious interaction between church and theology. And intercultural theological ethics could be instrumental along this path.

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, born 1966 in Steyr (Upper Austria), studied Catholic Theology (Dr. theol., University of Innsbruck) and Philosophy (Dr. phil., University of Vienna). He received his habilitation in Fundamental Theology (2011, University of Innsbruck). He served as University Assistant (Prae- and Post-Doc) at the University of Innsbruck and the Theological Private University of Linz. Since 2011, he has been professor at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Salzburg, and director of the Centre for Intercultural Theology and Study of Religions.