

Laudation on the Awarding of the Karl Barth Prize to Sándor Fazakas

June 8, 2024, at the Holy Cross Church in Frankfurt/Oder

Honored Churchpresident Dr. Jung,

Dear Zsuzsa Fazakas, Dear Sándor Fazakas,

Esteemed Participants of the christlichen Begegnungstage,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

The year 1989, when a powerful wind of freedom swept through Europe and the regimes behind the Iron Curtain collapsed within a few months, was experienced by Sándor Fazakas as a twenty-four-year-old theology student. He grew up in Transylvania, Romania, studied theology in Cluj (Klausenburg) and Sibiu (Hermannstadt), and then moved to Debrecen, where he completed his studies in 1991 and 1992.

This is the world described by Nobel Prize-winning author Herta Müller, where Sándor Fazakas experienced his early, formative years. He certainly experienced it differently from the slightly older Herta Müller from the neighboring Romanian Banat. Unlike her, he was able to grow up in the relative security of a pastor's house. However, the deformations of people under communist rule, their hopes after the great upheaval of 1989, the waning of the wind of freedom, and the concern for maintaining a liberal democracy became central impulses for his thinking, continually engaging him anew.

Three distinctive verbs set the tone: Remember, Working through the past, and Reconcile. His 2003 habilitation thesis outlined the framework: "Remembrance and Reconciliation. Criteria of Coping with the Past". Reconciliation forms the fundamental tone. Anyone who approaches the failures and entanglements of guilt in the past *theologically* cannot do so except from the perspective of the Gospel, especially if he has read and understood Barth. But precisely in this way, the critical view gains its incorruptibility. Nothing needs to be glossed over or trivialized. But neither must it be judged as if we had the authority of the divine final judgment.

In retrospect of the communist era, Fazakas has clarified the failures of the Reformed church leaderships in Hungary. With the "Theology of the Serving Church". they tried to assert their place in the totalitarian world of the communist state, considering socialism as the societal form appropriate to the Gospel, to which the church should subserviently align itself in following Christ. They believed they could also refer to Barth for this. The historical development of humanity towards communism effectively took on the role of a second source of revelation.

This perspective was by no means limited to Hungary but was also found in Western Europe. However, in Hungary, this pattern of thinking stifled criticism and theologically cultivated the path of opportunism.

Fazakas repeatedly demonstrates that this was an improper appropriation of Barth. With Ervin Vályi-Nagy and István Török, he brings to light two Hungarian theologians whose deconstruction of the historical-theological concept of the "Theology of the Serving Church" strengthened the spirit of resistance in the younger generation. Török, who had studied with Barth in Münster, saw that "the discussion of the relationship between church and socialism had pushed a new center into theology, displacing the real center, Christ, from the middle."¹ This problem of such a subsidiary center did not disappear after 1989. For wherever historical interpretations as orientation patterns and political options concerning the past come into play, the knowledge of God derived from Jesus Christ as the one Word of God is disrupted and interrupted. Vályi-Nagy rightly feared, in view of the political change in Hungary, "that due to historical-theological interpretations, the churches could again become 'followers, imitators, or predecessors' of political events under different signs."²

For Fazakas, therefore, the years after 1989 are also subject to critical review. For what had happened? On the one hand, the critical engagement with the time before 1989 was only half-heartedly undertaken by the Reformed Church in Hungary and, classified as an elitist project by intellectuals, bypassed the majority of the people. The great promises of societal transformation processes have given way to "sobering experiences."³ Fazakas noted in 2015 "a certain fatigue with democracy – authoritarian tendencies and the banality of politics overshadow civil society demands and initiatives."⁴ Instead of a social market economy, people are experiencing an advancing and unrestricted capitalism and a continuing East-West divide, instead of the desired European unity, a Europe in crisis, and, in addition, the now warlike threats from new power politics. It is not surprising that "nostalgia and longing for the former social security from the time of socialism"⁵ are spreading again.

This brings us to the level on which Sándor Fazakas' ethics are situated. Ethics must, of course, be addressed, not least because Fazakas teaches ethics in Debrecen, is a co-editor of the Journal

¹ Sándor Fazakas, Links- und Rechtsbarthianer in der reformierten Kirche Ungarns, in: Martin Leiner / Michael Trowitzsch (Hg.), Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis, Göttingen 2008, 228–235, hier 233.

² Ebd.

³ Sándor Fazakas, Was leistet Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit, in: Georg Plasger (Hg.), Geschichte erinnern als Auftrag der Versöhnung. Theologische Reflexionen über Schuld und Vergebung, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2015, 14–34, hier 16.

⁴ Ebd.

⁵ A.a.O., 17.

for Evangelical Ethics [Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik], and has repeatedly contributed his Central and Eastern European expertise to the Ethics Circle of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). However, the word "ethics" would be too narrow if one only thought of the action-oriented subfield of systematic theology. Ethics here are embedded in the whole of theology, theologically justifiable and obligated to justify, as we find in Barth's Church Dogmatics, and then, also here in convergence with Barth, practiced as consciously perceived, alert contemporaneity. The ethics that Sándor Fazakas represents and which have made him known far beyond the borders of his country, commit themselves to the fundamental insights of the Barmen Theological Declaration. He reads it as an ecclesiological and simultaneously socio-theologically oriented text and brings its liberating, anti-totalitarian impulses to light. In this way, insightful dialogue levels with the political analyses of Hannah Arendt and other socio-philosophically ambitious theoretical designs are established.

A characteristic example is the Hungarian-German consultation prepared by him and Georg Plasger in November 2022 in Debrecen. It dealt with the theme of *authority*⁶ and examined the often-observed and lamented crisis of authority in the Western world. The loss of authority is evident everywhere. *True* authority is recognized by the fact that its recognition is self-evident and not enforced. It is missing all too often. Into the resulting voids, a new authoritarianism presses, whose representatives recommend themselves as cheap agents of societal problem-solving and have no qualms about removing established democratic regulations as obstacles.

This is also observed in some post-totalitarian societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, Fazakas diagnoses, referring to relevant political science analyses, the resurgence of a "plebiscitary leader democracy" of the type of charismatic authority described by Max Weber: "The peculiarity of this system is that it is formally democratic, but in content, it exhibits authoritarian tendencies."⁷ The phenomenon is traced with a fine hand: The "supreme leader" seeks to conduct a revolutionary policy beyond his personal abilities; "for this purpose, he constantly redefines his role, adopts the role of a reliable crisis manager, questions the validity of previous and established norms and rules, and legitimizes his exercise of power by invoking the so-called exceptional situation of the moment."⁸

Fazakas observes similar trends in the realm of religion and church. In worship services on special occasions, it is not the dogmatic-theological judgment that plays a role; rather,

⁶ Vgl. Georg Plasger / Sándor Fazakas (Hg.), *Autorität und autoritäre Strukturen. Reflexionen aus reformiert-theologischer Perspektive*, Göttingen 2024.

⁷ Sándor Fazakas, *Sehnsucht nach Autorität und die soziale Wirklichkeit der Kirche*, in: Plasger / Fazakas (Hg.), *Autorität* (Anm. 6), 32, Anm. 39.

⁸ Ebd.

"emotional factors and moral criteria" dominate; what is sought is the presentation of a pseudo-reality by a type of person or ethos that "transcends everyday realities and makes everyday life more bearable."⁹ His church, too, is again susceptible to the enforcement of power interests in the appointment of leading offices, thus contributing to the erosion of the principles of presbyterial-synodal church orders and "to the disappearance of democratic culture within the church."¹⁰

This brings us back to the three verbs: Remember, Working through the Past, and Reconcile. Memory must be kept alive, the failures of the past must be critically examined if we do not want to repeat them as if nothing had happened. The church, too, could avoid many mistakes if it critically reflects on its past and does not ignore its dark sides. Its actions were culpable not only because it refrained from advocating for the disenfranchised, criticizing the political regime, or its own dubious compromises out of fear of state repression. Failure and guilt are also present where "societal reality was perceived in a limited way, where theological-ecclesiastical traditions were preferred instead of striving for new context-related biblical exegetical insights, and where practical consequences [...] were allowed that had to result in exclusion or denied solidarity."¹¹ We bear responsibility not only for our actions (or inactions) but also for the nature of our thinking and the will to its clarity. Even our understanding of reality is ethically relevant. Christians and churches are also responsible for "their view of reality, indeed for their theology."¹² In the year of Immanuel Kant's 300th birthday, it seems appropriate to extend his famous critiques to include a critique of ecclesial reason.

In any case, we must assume that narrow perspectives and losses of reality settle and assert themselves more easily in social communities than we initially suspect. The history of the 20th century, but also the first two decades of the new century, offer a wealth of examples for this. Clarity of vision and wise judgment have always been precious. It was no coincidence that Fazakas repeatedly faced the question of whether not only individuals but also collectives must be considered ethical subjects. This question challenged him so much that it became one of his research focuses. Behind this lies the intensely debated problem of collective guilt since World War II. Some said collectives cannot sin. Others replied that collectives sin even more. These views remain relatively unreconciled to this day. Fazakas was never satisfied with this. Drawing on theological and system-theoretical-sociological approaches, he opted for a cautious affirmation of the second view: collectives can become guilty as such. He clarified this with

⁹ A.a.O., 33.

¹⁰ A.a.O., 34.

¹¹ Fazakas, Was leistet Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit? (Anm. 3), 28.

¹² Ebd.

regard to the Church, which, as an institution and social system, actually acts as a collective agent in concrete social contexts. Whether and how mistakes "are to be assessed in the categories of guilt and sin, requires theological analysis."¹³ Nevertheless, it must be said: "Yes, there are guilty collectives, including the Church [...]."¹⁴

But what about Karl Barth? The answer is relatively simple: Barth's thinking serves as a meta-theoretical radar here, contributing to recognizing and avoiding the most significant theological errors. In this sense, Sándor Fazakas provides a vivid example of what happens when someone thinks *with* Barth *beyond* Barth himself. As we know, this was entirely in line with the intentions of the grand Teacher from Basel.

But there is more to say. Fazakas not only founded a Barth Institute in Debrecen (2008) and organized conferences on Karl Barth repeatedly but also lectured at major international symposia on Barth, inspiring the audience with insights gained in this field. One of his finest works is the essay on the three lectures Barth delivered in April 1934 in Paris: "Revelation, Church, Theology [Offenbarung, Kirche, Theologie]".¹⁵ This marked the initial encounter of Barthian theology with France. Accordingly, Barth's remarks were correspondingly fundamental. Fazakas placed the Paris lectures in the context of Barth's theological development and illuminated their crucial statements, which pointed beyond themselves to the Theological Declaration of the Synod in Barmen, adopted six weeks later. And he does not simply read Barth's texts as theological snapshots but asks what they have to say to us today.

Thus, Barth's understanding of revelation fulfills a critical function regarding the postmodern liquefaction of the question of truth and plays an important role precisely in cases where political options are linked to soteriological claims.¹⁶ Barth's view of the Church leads Fazakas to question whether today's Church "does not rather determine its existence and self-consciousness by the feasibility and fulfillability of extra-ecclesiastical expectations or intra-ecclesiastical 'niche feelings' instead of acknowledging its fundamental dependence on God's action." ¹⁷ Theology would miss its task if it failed to render the Church the critical and

¹³ Sándor Fazakas, Kriterien für die Schuldhaftigkeit von Kollektiven. Eine Response auf Michael Beintker, in: Sándor Fazakas, Georg Plasger (Hg.), *Geschichte erinnern als Auftrag der Versöhnung. Theologische Reflexionen über Schuld und Vergebung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2015, 183–194, hier 194.

¹⁴ Ebd.

¹⁵ Sándor Fazakas, „Offenbarung, Kirche, Theologie“. Die Pariser Vorträge von 1934, in: Michael Beintker / Christian Link / Michael Trowitzsch (Hg.), *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935). Aufbruch – Klärung – Widerstand. Beiträge zum Internationalen Symposium vom 1. bis 4. Mai 2003 in der Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek Emden, Zürich 2005*, 407–424.

¹⁶ A.a.O., 414.

¹⁷ A.a.O., 417.

encouraging service according to which "*listening* to God should be considered the decisive characteristic of the Church." ¹⁸

Does theology have the task of "glorifying modern reason and modern lifestyle," or should it "stand on the side of critical thinking and call for repentance"?¹⁹ Fázakas responds: "I advocate for the latter – without advocating for total questioning or radical negation."²⁰ The "metanoia of faith" (Vályi-Nagy) contains the germ of a real transformation, a conversion of the existing. "Why? Because the hope awakened by faith counts on God's presence in this world, which cannot be walled into the structure of the world but is publicly attested to through the proclamation and action of the Church."²¹

With the awarding of the Karl Barth Prize to Sándor Fazakas, a theologian is honored who exemplarily seeks theological orientation in the upheavals of post-totalitarian societies in Eastern Central Europe and repeatedly reflects on the paths of theology and the Church based on the fundamental insights of Barthian theology. The insights gained in this way awaken joy in the liberating dynamism of the Gospel and open the view to the tasks of the Church and the defense of justice and democracy in today's Europe.

Michael Beintker

¹⁸ A.a.O., 424.

¹⁹ Fazakas, Links- und Rechtsbarthianer (Anm. 1), 235.

²⁰ Ebd.

²¹ Ebd.