



Contribution of KOLPING INTERNATIONAL in response to the call of Pope Francis

*“People must become joyful in their faith
if they are to devote their whole heart to it.*

Adolph Kolping

Can joy be a touchstone of faith, as Blessed Adolph Kolping, the Founder of our Society, stated in the mid-19th century? We, who stand in his tradition today, believe: Yes, it can. The Gospel of Jesus Christ reaches and nourishes people's hearts only when it is actually perceived and accepted as Good News. This in no way implies a mere feel-good faith that does not challenge people in their self-centredness and also sinfulness. In fact, we believe with Adolph Kolping that Jesus' message of love can only truly find its place in people's hearts if it leads to genuine joy. Joy about the promise that we are all loved, wanted and accepted by God. Joy about the fact that we cannot and need not create our happiness in life alone, but are always referred to our fellow human beings, to Creation and ultimately to God.

Who we are

Celebrating the joy of faith is a central unifying element in our community of more than 400,000 women, men and children in 60 countries around the world and in more than 9,000 Kolping Families (grassroots groups). We feel this joy when we refer to the pillars that unite our activities as an association worldwide: the person and message of Jesus Christ, the social teaching of the Church and the vision and actions of Adolph Kolping. KOLPING is today a global and cross-generational education and action community. A family-like community, its work is shaped by mutual trust, the readiness to

engage in dialogue and the ability to deal with conflict situations. As a Catholic social association, we feel at home in the Church of Jesus Christ in the tradition of the Second Vatican Council and make our contribution to the world mission of Christians autonomously and independently. By means of a comprehensive range of educational and living assistance, of spiritual and material support measures, we want to help young people in particular to develop their identity and thereby, at the same time, motivate and enable them to fulfill their responsibilities in their family and in their work, in society and in the Church.

Today, in our Kolping Families and institutions, we aim to

- offer people a home in a cross-generational community in which they can continue their spiritual and economic development together;
- empower one another so that we can prove ourselves in the world, and thus in work and our occupation, in marriage and family, in the Church, in society, and government;
- offer counseling to one another and to those who live around us;
- promote the common good in the Christian meaning of the word in all our activities and contribute to the constant renewal and humanization of our societies;
- in particular to assist those people who are marginalized in society and in the Church, to realize and utilize their opportunities and potential;
- attain a more equitable distribution of the earth's goods and their sustainable use for future generations around the world.

Our community is a part of the Church

A spiritual and religious life is the source of our commitment. For many people, this happens through the personal encounter with Jesus Christ and finds its expression in prayer and in ardent love, listening to the word of God and in the celebration of the sacraments. This fundamental attitude characterizes the work of the association and its members and helps in addressing current issues and challenges.

In coming together, the members of KOLPING express and exercise their freedom of assembly and association within the Church. We are aware that personal and shared responsibility in the service to heal the world can be carried out only in close communion with the local churches, and that its spiritual roots lie in the universal church as the community of God's people. Being open to dialogue and working together with people of different religions and denominations is a major concern for us.

The members of the association belong to the Church through baptism and, as part of God's people, they fulfill their shared responsibility for the Church. As a Catholic social association, KOLPING plays an important bridging role between the Church and society. As a Catholic association with ecumenical openness, KOLPING asks Christians of all denominations for collaboration and deliberately seeks dialogue and cooperation with other religions and confessions.

As an association of dedicated lay people, we are willing to work together on all levels in the various panels in the leadership of the Church and to actively participate in the respective initiatives and tasks. Since its very beginning, our association has practiced cooperation on a partnership basis between lay people, bishops, priests, deacons, and members of religious orders. This continues to be indispensable for us. The baptized members are willing to take on shared responsibility in their parishes and dioceses. This calls for a respectful interaction based on dialogue. However, the autonomy and self-determination of the association is not compromised by this cooperation.

Our experience from more than 170 years: Universality instead of uniformity

In the history of our association, we have experienced different learning movements, most of which have also resulted in structural changes. We would like to outline some major learning experiences that we have had on our joint path as an international global family.

The experience of diversity is central for us. Due to our expansion across national borders and hundreds of cultures, there has been an important debate in the past about how much unity there should be in the light of the diversity of our association and which rules should be binding and the same all over the world. In 2017, we reaffirmed in our basic documents that our globally binding principles shall give everyone the opportunity to live the universality of our values without necessarily leading to a uniformity of the forms of manifestation and expression of the association. Hence, the way in which the above-mentioned basic principles of the association present themselves in different cultural contexts may differ greatly. This diversity, which leaves enough room for different ways of "being Kolping", rests on a shared commitment to central values. What does this mean in concrete terms?

Equal rights between women and men

We call ourselves Kolping sisters and Kolping brothers. Our grassroots groups are called Kolping Families. We thereby express an understanding of community that is based on closeness and interaction on an equal footing. In the 1960s, the decision was made to allow not only men but also women to be Kolping members. This took account of a development that led from the association of wandering journeymen to a community of like-minded people who were often active in the parish - men, women, young people and children who all together shape the life and activities of the Kolping Families. For us at Kolping it is now self-evident that all offices and services are equally open to women as they are to men. This applies from the local level of the Kolping Families in the parishes to the diocesan level, the national level and the continental and international level. We have found that the charisma of leadership is given both to women and to men.

Equal rights between clergy and laity

Moreover, leadership positions and thus power are not bound to ordination. Priests and deacons serve as praesides, bishops as protectors in our association. The Praeses is a board member at each level of the association and assumes responsibility there as an equal among equals. He must be elected by the membership meetings and has a seat and a vote on the board like all other members of the board.

Many priests report on how enriching it is for them to be involved at Kolping. Unlike in the parish, not all expectations rest on their creative power and leadership skills, but they are allowed to serve together with other sisters and brothers, in the collective responsibility of the board. In addition to the praesides or together with them, theologically trained lay people also carry out this task in many Kolping Families, especially in Europe, often under the name of "spiritual directors". As things stand at present, only the General Praeses heading Kolping International must be a Catholic priest. But even he

performs his duties only together with the International Executive Committee and the International Executive Board, against whom he cannot implement any decisions.

Democratic structures with trust in the Holy Spirit

For us, the formation of opinions and decision-making on our way through time follow democratic principles. We ensure that we work together as brothers and sisters. In membership meetings and meetings of delegates, we are allowed and encouraged to engage in intense debates on how we can best fulfil today the mission of the Gospel and of our founder Adolph Kolping. By praying and sharing in the Eucharist and by celebrating together, we maintain a spirit of togetherness marked by love and respect, even when we disagree. This may sometimes not be possible in personal dealings, but we always have respect for the values of our global Kolping family and its statutes. Besides, everyone who could not prevail with his or her arguments has the opportunity to continue to campaign for his or her positions and, in time, to convince others.

We therefore want to listen to each other and decide things together. While the institutionalized church is often perceived as too rigid and cumbersome (also in comparison with some evangelical groups), we try to make the participation of all in the mission of Jesus Christ shine. We practise a distribution of competences that takes into account the office, charisma and capabilities. For us, this does not contradict the characteristic proprium of consecration.

The history of our association is full of examples where it took years or decades for a traditional practice to be changed by new majorities. It has always been such decisions and the struggle to reach them that makes our association vital and attractive to new members today.

This struggle on how to find a common path in our association is not unlike the struggle of the members of the Church: as a cross-generational association, we are constantly forced to exchange views. In practice, this constant struggle for positions means that we have to be mindful of others. This requires a culture of discourse and experienced, overarching, unifying community that meets the different ages and situations in life with respect and interest. Everyone should be given the space they need.

What is true for decisions on content is also true for appointments to leadership positions. From the level of Kolping Families to the international level of our association, offices are determined through democratic elections. Statutes regulate which association level may send how many delegates to the next higher level. We choose the people who lead our association in equal and free elections. It motivates people to get involved and at the same time it always subjects leaders to critical scrutiny by the electoral bodies. It is not money but the number of members in a particular region that decides on the composition of these electoral bodies. As a result, our association has developed in a pleasant way over the past few years from a historical Eurocentrism to a colourful, international global family with a strong Global South.

Power only for a limited time

Elections are held regularly. No one in the association is elected for life - neither priests nor lay people. This means that the power of leadership is always limited to a certain period of time. In addition, a system of controlling and supervisory institutions is established at all levels of our association so as to ensure that there are no unhealthy concentrations of power. This supervision is exercised in a spirit of consultation and cooperation between brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, after a certain period of time, all those holding responsible positions are obliged to account for their actions and to stand for re-election. There is little room for haughtiness and excessive power in these structures.

International exchange between partners makes people culturally sensitive

Members worldwide live and work in the spirit and tradition of Adolph Kolping. This tradition is brought to life in different ways in different cultures. As an international family-like community, members, Kolping sisters and Kolping brothers learn from each other in meetings and partnerships. We are a dynamic community where people join forces to build a more just world and work to enhance their own quality of life and that of their fellow human beings. In this way, we want to give people hope and support them on their way to a good life. Our service to the One World is particularly visible in our cooperation as partners. People from different levels of the association and different regions of the world get involved in sustainable and lasting partnerships. In these partnerships, there is an exchange of culture, spirituality and material goods. The assumption of responsibility as partners from different countries and regions is a vivid expression of the joint service to the One World and of solidarity with one another. This cooperation between partners is based on understanding and tolerance for other ways of life.

Focus on the holistic development of the human being

Our involvement in the Church has never been based exclusively on liturgical practices, but must also contribute to the holistic development of the human being. That is why religious and social elements always complement each other in our associational work. Social elements often take up the concerns of young people, but worldwide they address the needs of the whole spectrum of societies. In this context, it is important to us that it is never a question of social commitment alongside spirituality, but rather that the commitment is an expression of spirituality and also that any experience gained in this way flows back into spirituality. There must be space for such movements in the Church. This space in turn then offers the chance to experience a real sense of community.

An open community that invites people to follow God's call

KOLPING is open to people from all regions and cultures, regardless of their descent or social background, their age or gender, their religious or political beliefs, their sexual orientation or physical and mental condition. We promote the mutual interests of our members according to the cultures and traditions of the various regions and provide opportunities for new and varied experiences. In doing

so, we listen together to the Word of God and want to make the fundamentals of our association a reality in the life and work of the Kolping Families.

As a family-like community, it is our experience that it is a reality that families and life plans may also break down. We are particularly committed to marriage and family and strengthen those in crisis. Where couples no longer manage to find each other and enter into new partnerships, they are not excluded and should not be so liturgically. Basically, the following applies for us: Trust is earned where people are united in loyalty and love and are there for each other on a long-term basis. For us, marriage and family represent an important prerequisite for the personal development of human beings and thus also for the evolution of a humane society. KOLPING respects people's choices of how to live their lives in the knowledge that respect and recognition for queer people are by no means something that is taken for granted in all cultures. We also experience unequal developments here in our association.

On the road together as learners

Despite all that has been outlined here, we are aware that all our efforts are subject to reservations. We may not always and everywhere be able to live up to our own expectations and insights. But we are on our way together to increasingly bring to reality the form of church, of companionship in faith which is modeled for us in the Gospel.

As an independent social association, we also see our organisational independence from the institutionalized church as a step towards a better impact on society. At the same time, we do not see ourselves as detached from the Church but as institutionally committed to good cooperation, yet we are not integrated into the concrete structures of the institutionalized church. This means that we also provide room for people who, for whatever reason, have difficulties with the institutionalized church and who currently do not or no longer want to fully commit themselves to it.

A faith that brings joy and freedom

It has become evident: Our association is a reflection of the diversity of the world. People who have to struggle for survival every day in subsistence farming in the rural areas of the Global South are just as committed to us at KOLPING as members in the Global North, where church affiliation is rapidly declining in an oversaturated world of consumption.

We are united worldwide in our shock at the sexual abuse and the resulting suffering of those affected, that was possible in church structures, and how that suffering is dealt with. For many it means an existential question with regard to their involvement in the Catholic Church.

Many people become active KOLPING members because they want to celebrate and live their faith in the risen Christ with others in unity as brothers and sisters. They want to be part of this community just as they are. They want to feel accepted and not judged. They do not only want to be heard, but to have a real say. They want to help shape the Church as God's people and be on the way together to discover God's love again and again. And most of all, they want to be strengthened to carry on this love in their own actions.

Sharing such faith in community brings joy and makes people happy. People like to embrace such faith with all their heart.

KOLPING INTERNATIONAL
International Executive Board

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Christoph Huber'.

Msgr. Christoph Huber
General Praeses

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Dr. Markus Demele'.

Dr. Markus Demele
General Secretary

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Karin Wollgarten'.

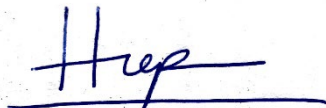
Karin Wollgarten
Managing Director

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Dancille Mujawamariya'.

Dancille Mujawamariya
International Executive Board

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Manuel Hörmeyer'.

Manuel Hörmeyer
International Executive Board

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Paul Nguyen Huu Nghia Hiep'.

Paul Nguyen Huu Nghia Hiep
International Executive Board

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Rufino Rodríguez'.

Rufino Rodríguez
International Executive Board

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Erich Reischmann
International Executive Board