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Karl Forster (1928–1981)

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Karl Forster (1928–1981) – priest, church politician, publicist, pastoral theologian – operated at the interface between the Catholic Church, the public sphere, and the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany. As an important figure within Catholicism, he promoted the opening of the Church during the conciliar reform process and the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. His biography reflects the fundamental change that the Church and Catholicism underwent with respect to a democratic culture in both self-understanding and practice.

Forster was part of the so-called ›skeptical generation‹ in the new Federal Republic, who from their positions of influence assumed constitutive responsibility in the realms of politics, society, and church. The experience of National Socialism and war in Landshut (Bavaria) had led Forster to study Catholic theology after 1945, in Freising and Munich. He was ordained a priest by Joseph Cardinal Wendel in 1953. At the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich Forster demonstrated political acumen as head of the student representative organization ›Allgemeiner Studenten Ausschuss‹ and became enthralled with the new democratic constitutional order of the Federal Republic. At the same time, he demonstrated above-average theological talent, which suggested an academic career.

As a consequence of the dedication he showed during the process of founding the Catholic Academy in Bavaria, Forster was appointed its first director in 1957. In this role, he championed a culture of open conversation of the ›church‹ with the ›world‹ that would also generate favorable publicity. At conferences that enjoyed a public reception far beyond the boundaries of Bavaria, high-ranking representatives of church, politics, society, and academia debated such issues as the conciliar self-conception of the church, religious freedom, the possibility of a rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the Social Democratic and Free Democratic Parties, as well as new governing alliances, such as a ›grand coalition.‹ With his efforts on behalf of a new relationship between the Church and the political parties, which were borne in part out of personal interest, Forster was one of the leading trailblazers from the 1950s onwards for a dialogue between the Catholic Church and Social Democracy (the Social Democrats). In view of recent German history up to 1945 and the omnipresence of the Cold War, he sought a basis for reaching a consensus with former ideological opponents in order to establish the Catholic Church as a permanent feature of the political landscape in the Federal Republic. Yet his commitment to building political bridges also met with mistrust within the ranks of the Christian Democrats and parts of his own church, and he suffered politically motivated attacks and personal hostility.

As the first secretary of the German Bishops' Conference that was established in 1966, Forster – alongside the Munich Cardinal Julius Döpfner – laid the essential foundations for the modern administration of that body during the period from 1967 to 1971, including the establishment of the ›Association of the Dioceses of Germany‹ (Verband der Diözesen

Deutschlands; VDD). In this capacity, he also helped reach an accommodation with the Social Democrats in regard to school and education policy, whereby the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* served as his guideline. Forster was convinced that the Catholic Church, with its newly revised conceptions of democracy, human dignity, and Christian values, should have a decisive voice in the discourses of civil society. Against a backdrop of fierce directional disputes that took place within the German Catholic Church following Vatican II, Forster – as both secretary and a member of the ›Common Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic‹ held from 1971 to 1975 – pushed for representative structures in the Church that had been agreed by the synod and within whose framework issues that were relevant to both church and society could be openly debated.

In 1971, Forster took a professorship for pastoral theology at the Catholic theological faculty of the newly founded University of Augsburg. His scholarly interest focused on the social-scientific survey conducted among German Catholics in preparation for the Common Synod, which he himself accompanied with a pioneering spirit. In the course of the civic debate over the limitations on legal abortion, the old divisions between Catholics, on the one hand, and the SPD and FDP, on the other, reopened. In the debate over liberalizing Paragraph 218 (on abortion) of the criminal code, Forster, as a publicist and advisor to the German bishops, took up an uncompromising position vis-à-vis the reform efforts of the ›Social-Liberal‹ coalition.

Karl Forster always held fast to the principle, which he had first embraced in his youth, that the Catholic Church should participate in public discourse in ways that generated effective publicity, and that this accorded with its own self-conception, as well as that of each individual Christian. His actions were therefore focused on promoting the Church's readiness to engage in dialogue, which the Second Vatican Council had emphasized. Among his successes that continue to have an effect today are his early establishment of a boundary-bursting culture of political discourse and discussion within German Catholicism and making this into a cornerstone of both his practical church politics and his pastoral-theological reflections.