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Paul: From religious extremist to extremist of love

Archbishop Thomas Schirmacher delivers the ecumenical “Bishop’s Sermon” for the second time in Neumarkt Minster on the subject of Christian persecution

(Bonn, 02.10.2025) For the second time since 2018, Archbishop Thomas Schirmacher delivered the annual ecumenical bishop’s sermon in memory of persecuted Christians at St. John’s Cathedral in Neumarkt, Bavaria (Upper Palatinate). The service is organized by the Ecumenical Working Group on Religious Freedom. Catholic and Protestant pastors took part in the Catholic service, and various free churches were also represented.

The host, Pastor Norbert Winner, welcomed Schirmacher as an old acquaintance and expressed his delight that Schirmacher had been ordained in apostolic succession, albeit as a Protestant. He emphasized that Schirmacher had not only been campaigning against the persecution of Christians for decades and had squeezed in the bishop’s sermon between trips to the Middle East but was also working on behalf of the International Institute for Religious Freedom and the International Society for Human Rights to promote religious freedom for all and peaceful interfaith coexistence.

Schirmacher preached on the text in Romans, chapter 12, verses 14–18, under the heading “Live in peace with all people, as far as it depends on you.” What is unusual,



Archbishop Thomas Schirmacher during his episcopal sermon © Martin Warnecke

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according to Schirmmacher, is that Paul wrote this, because this appeal for peace did not come naturally to him.

“The highly educated Paul ordered the killing of followers of his own religion who thought differently because of their beliefs! He was the prime example of what we would call a religious extremist today. It was only through his encounter with Jesus Christ that he was transformed from a religious extremist into an extremist of love, reconciliation, and peace. The ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do’ that Jesus prayed on the cross and Stephen prayed before his stoning under Paul’s supervision became Paul’s own paradigm.”

This is incredibly relevant for the present day, according to Schirmmacher, as the churches in the Middle East and the hotspot of Christian martyrdom—Nigeria—are primarily victims of religious extremist violence. “Persecuted Christians prove day after day, often under the most difficult conditions, that the answer to religious violence cannot be counter-violence, but faith, hope, and love, as Paul proclaimed,” said the bishop.

Schirmmacher reported on his recent travels through 25 countries in Africa and the Middle East and visits to church leaders of all denominations. Everywhere, church leaders are pre-occupied with the question of how to uphold the message of Jesus’ love in the face of extremist violence. Preventing young people in particular from taking revenge is a major challenge that no one in the West can imagine.

He had his last conversation on this subject with the Syrian Catholic Patriarch in Beirut, with whom he was preparing for an upcoming visit to the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch. Together with the President of Lebanon, he will be the keynote speaker at a major interfaith peace conference in Beirut in October 2025.

However, according to Schirmmacher, everywhere he goes he encounters the conviction that the Russian Orthodox Patriarch’s decision to declare holy war is contrary to the Gospel. Schirmmacher pointed out that, as with Paul and most religious extremists, the

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During the service in St. John's Minster © Martin Warnecke

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victims of this Russian holy war are followers of their own faith. After all, 60 percent of the 600 religious sites destroyed by Russian bombs in Ukraine are Orthodox churches and monasteries.

Schirmmacher is not only active worldwide for religious freedom and against the persecution of Christians but also specializes in researching religious extremism in all religions and worldviews as a professor of sociology of religion.

The Nürnberger Nachrichten newspaper wrote about the bishop's sermon: "At the invitation of retired pastor Ernst Herbert, Archbishop Thomas Schirmmacher came to Neumarkt for the second time to attend the Working Group for Religious Freedom and gave the sermon at the evening mass in St. John's Cathedral, presided over by Canon Norbert Winner. The 65-year-old Schirmmacher is president of the International Society for Human Rights and president of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. He was also secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, which has around 600 million Christian members, until 2024. Andreas Grell performed his last official duty as deputy Protestant dean in Neumarkt before moving to Coburg. He welcomed the distinguished guest with the quote, 'He is the Pope's favorite Protestant'. Bishop Schirmmacher met with the late Pope Francis several times. In his sermon, the dignitary emphasized that any kind of forced conversion is wrong. 'Faith cannot be imposed, but must be voluntary,' he said. In many countries in Asia and Africa where there is no religious freedom, the number of Christians is growing enormously, in stark contrast to Europe. At the political level, there is no alternative to dialogue. 'Weapons are not capable of creating lasting peace and prosperity,' he said, referring to the wars currently raging. Church attendance in Russia is very low because extremist politics are being drawn into the church."

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1, photo 2 and photo 3:** Archbishop Thomas Schirmmacher during his episcopal sermon © Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 4 and photo 5:** During the service in St. John's Minster © Martin Warnecke
- Announcement in the Nürnberger Nachrichten newspaper of the bishop's sermon on 21 September 2025 (in German): <https://bonner-querschnitte.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/BQ0879.jpg>
- Press release from the Nürnberger Nachrichten newspaper: <https://nn.de/region/neumarkt/erzbischof-halt-die-bischofspredigt-so-war-der-gottesdienst-im-neumarkter-munster-1.14846267>

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