

Peter Dabrock
Eulogy for Hans Günter Ulrich on April 8, 2026

Dear Karin,
Dear Mrs. Ulrich,
Dear Mrs. Ulrich-Riedhammer,
Dear Ulrich family,
Dear mourners,

It was Hans Günter Ulrich's wish that we do not hold a funeral service in the church, but rather celebrate a worship service. We should not look to him, but to "the eternally rich God," as we gather today in his memory: that is, you, dear Karin, dear Ulrich family, who were and remain very closely connected—for half a century or a lifetime—and we, who had professional, academic, theological, or, for some, even recreational ties with him. Of course, today we do not look only to the eternally rich God; despite it being Holy Week, we also hear the message of the Resurrection not without pain.

Rather, when we think of Hans Ulrich, Good Friday remains deeply felt: the sudden, all too sudden end despite his advanced age, the mere few weeks from diagnosis to death: How can we cope with this?

Even in the faith, whose promise and comfort Hans never tired of bearing witness to throughout his life in scholarship and preaching, death is a rupture, a thorn.

We allow ourselves to be assured of the message of the Resurrection; it is hope; yet: death, the death of this person, the death of Hans Ulrich, hurts.

It hurts like hell to have to let go of a loved one, a life partner for over half a century, a father, a father-in-law and grandfather, a family member, a friend, a theological teacher, an academic colleague.

This must, this may, this should be said—even during this Easter week.

All the more reason for me to thank you, dear Karin, for giving me the opportunity to reflect here on Hans's work as a theologian, academic colleague, and teacher. I do so as Hans's successor, to whom he granted the joy, the honor, and the gift of being a continuous discussion partner for 15 years in the advanced seminars of the Chair of Ethics and in various informal discussions.

I also do so on behalf of the department, the faculty, and the president of Friedrich-Alexander University.

Both our President Joachim Hornegger, who also wrote to you personally, and today, on his behalf, the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Kay Kirchmann, as well as the Department Chair, David du Toit—both of whom are here today—have expressly asked me to express their deep sympathy here, but have respected the wish that there should not be multiple speeches delivered here in honor of Hans Ulrich, but rather that he should be remembered above all through our shared time together and in conversation. Therefore, I too wish to limit myself to the essentials and not stand in the way of our gathering for too long.

What will remain in our memory—ours, the academic and theological community he leaves behind, and this is the only thing I can and wish to speak about—of Hans Ulrich?

My colleague from Hanover, Marco Hofheinz, who is also here, has given me permission to share a small anecdote from last year. Marco Hofheinz was at a conference with a group of students, where Hans was also present. After the conference, students approached Marco and told him they had been blown away by this old man. They were referring to Hans Günter Ulrich. And when asked what had impressed them so much, they replied: "Can you imagine, Mr. Hofheinz, he actually wanted to know how we think!" Marco Hofheinz continues: "What had happened? After the intensive group work phase, Hans had arranged to go for walks with them, sometimes individually and sometimes in small groups. Those must have been very intense conversations. In any case, my

students were genuinely moved by how warmly Hans faced them and how intently he listened to them. They felt completely taken seriously and understood by him. He succeeded, in a uniquely unobtrusive way, in inevitably confronting them with the inner logic of their own questions.” There is an astonishing amount contained in this single sentence, “Imagine, he wanted to know from us how we think!”—and it is also astonishing that students have the impression that teachers are not very interested in their perspectives. But that is probably also something to be noted—but let’s stick with Hans Ulrich: I can confirm this from the many, many advanced seminar sessions: Hans Günter Ulrich always wanted to know how others think. Especially the younger ones. He didn’t just want to tell them what was what. He wanted to understand what was going on in others, what questions moved them, where their thought processes led, where things got stuck, where something was pressing. And because he truly wanted that, he could listen like few others. Not tactically. Not patronizingly. Not as a pedagogical gesture. But with genuine attention, not resonant, but responsive.

It was quite remarkable: Hans Ulrich was so reserved in his academic and theological thinking and discourse—which were so important to him—that many people told me: “We talked so intensely, yet I don’t really know that much about him personally”—and yet there is this presence that captivated even the very young.

Where and how he acquired this very special way of doing theology cannot, of course, be traced back to a single key event or phase. That is and remains speculative: without wishing to psychologize, there are presumably influences from childhood and youth, experiences in his life that—to put it cautiously—align with how his students characterized his theology: being on a journey, committed, exploring, and full of anticipation that something entirely new lies ahead.

This approach incorporates the experiences of vulnerability in the early years of flight, the early death of his father, growing up in the foreign homeland of Franconia, but also practical experiences of faith there, as well as the experience of the very different levels of willingness to come to terms with the past among the generation of his teachers in Heidelberg and Göttingen; all of this may come together in an explanatory way when one considers his theology. There, one does not simply learn of an “awakening of conscience” or a path “out of the darkness,” as Frank Trentmann characterizes formative experiences of these postwar years in his monumental work, but above all of unresolved entanglement in guilt.

Precisely in the fields in which he was engaged for decades—in medical ethics (I think of his decades of tireless work on the Clinical Ethics Committee when I see Renate Wittern-Sterzel), in bioethics (I think of the many conversations with Walter Doerfler), in ecclesiastical and social challenges—this fundamental conviction was evident: that one must reckon with vulnerability, finitude, and also guilt in the lives of human beings as God’s called creatures. Hans was interested not only in norms, but in people with all their entanglements, hopes, limitations, and impositions. His theology was aware of the fragility of human orders and, at the same time, of the comfort, the promise, and the disruptive power of the Gospel. Many of us have memories of conversations in which Hans Ulrich brought these constants of human experience into play and defended them against dogmatic fixations, yet placed them within interpretations of biblical stories, motifs, or liturgical practices.

As responsive, as exploratory, as Socratic as he was, Hans could be extraordinarily incisive in his texts—sharp, clear, and firmly positioned. Written incisiveness, especially in “How Creatures Live,” which—I confess in my reading—is becoming important to me anew, and the willingness to listen do not contradict each other. They liberate one another. Precisely because he did not need to dominate in conversation, his texts were able to gain prominence. I always found this tension both fascinating and challenging.

His academic career tells the story of this inner breadth in its own way. It was not at all easy to piece it all together. But thanks above all to Stefan Heuser, we were then able to trace this

stimulating path to some extent. In the seminars, references to influences and encounters with great names would surface only incidentally, completely unpretentiously, sporadically, whenever it seemed appropriate: from philosophy: Hans Georg Gadamer, Karl Löwith; from theology: Ernst Wolf, Dietrich Ritschl, Gerhard Sauter, Stanley Hauerwas; from social theory: Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann.

From all of these and many others, he drew inspiration in Heidelberg, Göttingen, Bonn, and from Erlangen out into the world, yet he was never merely a student; rather, he repeatedly shaped many students himself, many of whom are present here today—he shaped them as a teacher and, I believe, it is fair to say, as an academic fatherly friend. He was a theological ethicist and teacher of rare distinction, especially here in Germany: on the one hand, deeply rooted in biblical tradition, the Church, and the liturgy; on the other hand, open to insights from a wide range of philosophical and sociological sources.

This combination of biblical tradition, the Church, and liturgy characterizes the theological-ethical school centered on Stanley Hauerwas, to whom—and I believe one is not mistaken in this—Hans Ulrich felt most closely connected, and which has been given the name “New Orthodoxy.” But Hans Ulrich was anything but a Neo-Orthodox thinker. For one thing, he was far too deeply influenced by the Frankfurt School, by Hannah Arendt’s “thinking without railings,” and by the system-shattering thought of Nietzsche. Theologically as well: someone who writes a work like “How Creatures Live” cannot ignore the fundamental difference between God and humanity and must therefore always acknowledge the limitations of his own position. This motivates him to listen anew time and again, to listen to others, to ask questions.

Thus, Hans neither clung to tradition nor chased after theological or philosophical fads. On the contrary: he had long been in dialogue with Hannah Arendt, even before the renaissance of her work had begun. Hans Ulrich understood how to relate the two: the exploration of the Christian tradition and the trend-scout-like yet unhurried perception of contemporary interpretations.

So what remains?

His work remains—and in it there is still so much to discover, in his spirit: listening, but not obediently or narrow-mindedly, not merely following or parroting.

His questions remain.

His sensitivity to vulnerability remains.

His way of listening remains; his style of exploratory theology remains.

His theological restlessness remains, which, precisely through careful observation, pointed toward hope.

That is perhaps why the task Hans Ulrich leaves us is this: not simply to pass on his theses, not his answers one-to-one, but to be inspired by how someone like Hans led others to think, precisely because he listened to them; how he was able to write with such precision because he could step back in conversation; because he knew that theology remains alive only when it is responsive, exploratory, and sensitive to vulnerability—ready to respond to reality and open to discovering what God reveals to people in their fragile world.

Alongside the grief and pain of no longer being able to continue the conversation with Hans Ulrich in person, there remains gratitude for the wise theologian and warm-hearted person: for his work, for his teaching, for his friendship, for his responsive questions.

Thank you, Hans, farewell! May you live in God’s blessing—and to you, dear Karin, dear Ulrich family, all strength.