

Service to the Universal Church¹

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"You cannot preserve teaching without allowing it to develop. Nor can it be bound to a narrow or unchanged interpretation without humbling the Holy Spirit and his action". This is what Pope Francis said in October 2017 at the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism.

Long road to the Synodal Way

When in 1995, after accusations of sexual abuse against the Viennese Cardinal Hans Herman Groër, a petition by "We are Church" was launched, first in Austria and then in Germany, yet 16 of the 27 German bishops forbade the collection of signatures in their dioceses. Now the synodal forums of the "Synodal Path" correspond exactly to the four points of the petition: "Building a Church of brothers and sisters", "Full equality for women", "Free choice between celibate and non-celibate forms of life" and "Positive evaluation of sexuality". The fifth point, "Good news instead of threatening news", can certainly be interpreted as the equivalent of evangelisation, which Pope Francis repeatedly admonishes for the "Synodal Path". For as long as the themes of the Synodal Path are not really dealt with, all efforts of evangelisation, however well-intentioned, will be in vain.

After the abuse at the Berlin Canisius College was uncovered in January 2010, the bishops had tried a "dialogue process" controlled by them, but it was very quickly downgraded to a non-binding "discussion process" and came to nothing. Only the shocking results of the MHG study in autumn 2018 and the protests, especially by women, at the Bishops' Conference in Lingen in spring 2019 led to the insight that the bishops are dependent on cooperation with the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and with experts "from outside".

The Vatican has not proved helpful in this church-political situation. The unexpected letter from Pope Francis "To the pilgrim people of God in Germany" and other voices from the Vatican triggered a very different echo in 2019. But Francis speaks of a "turning point", "which raises new and old questions, in view of which a discussion is justified and necessary". He encourages a "frank response to the present situation" and praises the fact that the Church in Germany has "given the universal church great holy men and women, great

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theologians, spiritual shepherds and lay people". Francis speaks of a "bottom-up synodality", only then comes the "top-down synodality".

Practice in fraternity

Pope Francis, who with reference to Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council vehemently declared himself in favour of a synodal Church at all levels, should take pleasure in this: At the first Assembly of the Synodal Way, the debate was as frankly debated, as respectfully listened to as it had not been for a long time in an official Catholic body. The renunciation of all symbolism of power characterised the first synodal assembly, but seemed to irritate some.

This Synodal Path presupposes a fundamental change of mentality, if not paradigm shift, in the spirit of the episcopal "Being Church Together" (2015). For formal structures are also part of the church's message, especially in a church so focused on tradition and symbolism. And all attempts to place faith and evangelisation at the centre of attention anew can only bear fruit against the backdrop of changed structures. On the fringes of the first synodal assembly and the five regional conferences, reform groups, women's associations and Mary 2.0 were very much present as bearers of hope for a transformed church. At least some bishops expressed the wish that the church leadership does not want to lose contact with women altogether. But just talking friendly with each other will no longer be enough.

Dynamics of Resistance

The Corona crisis has intensified and accelerated existing processes of alienation between church leadership and church people. After the completely unexpected and extremely irritating instruction of the Congregation of the Clergy in July 2020, some even said that the Synodal Path was now completely finished. The text, which was drawn up in Rome without any consultation with the local churches and is alien to life and faith, acts as if we in Germany had never thought about missionary parishes before. Has the Congregation for the Clergy not taken note of the scientific and pastoral debates of the last 50 years? But neither the Corona crisis nor the recent instruction of the Congregation of the Clergy should be allowed to slow down or even bring to a standstill the reform process which has been started with great difficulty and is urgently needed, an Open Letter of We Are Church appealed for, which met with much approval. A broad alliance of reform forces was needed, including in the Bishops' Conference.

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church cannot simply change its teaching at will. But the four forums of the Synodal Way deal with issues that have been debated since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). But the people of the church have been put off from decade to decade. Cardinal Müller speaks from Rome of the church in Germany: "It is hardly likely that a body like the Synodal Path in Germany could claim the Holy Spirit for itself," he is quoted in the "Tagespost".

The warnings of individual bishops against a German national church, a schism in the church or a theologically uneven debate create a false and highly unpleasant threatening backdrop. The attempt by conservative-traditionalist forces, including those from abroad, to exert influence in the media is also highly unpleasant.

Service to the world church

Internationally, the Synodal Path is already attracting considerable attention. Worldwide hopes are being placed on finding pastorally responsible and theologically sound answers to the crises of today. We need a further development of church teaching. The proposals for contemporary ministries and structures should be supported by the great majority of all participants, including the bishops. According to current church law, implementation must in any case be done by each individual bishop for his diocese. And many of the fundamental issues, such as compulsory celibacy for priests or the ordination of women, are and will remain the preserve of the pope or even a council.

The Synodal Path in Germany cannot and will not directly change the world church, no matter how good the consultations and decisions are. But the crisis in church leadership revealed by the abuse scandals, and the refusal to implement modern reforms, are not only found in Germany. As the abuse scandals show, the Roman Catholic Church is in an existential crisis worldwide. If, however, a theological debate can be conducted here in Germany that is up to date and viable solutions to the pent-up reforms can be found, then the Vatican will no longer be able to ignore them. This would then not be a special German path, but a service to the universal church. Without presentable results and their recognition by Rome, however, the Catholic Church will continue to lose credibility and even those who are still committed will be left behind.

Key question – The Women's question

The Catholic system of governance is in a deep crisis and gender equality is a key issue. Not the consecration of women must be justified, but their exclusion! The open, even controversial discussion in the working group "Women" at least gives hope. Many reforms were listed there which could already be implemented now without changes in church law. In the end, the first step in the question of ordination could be a recommendation, as unanimous as possible, of the permanent diaconate for women in a synodal diaconate church with newly formed ministries - similar to the vote of the Würzburg Synod 45 years ago.

Women in associations, religious orders and initiatives no longer remain silent in the face of the hitherto only verbal assertions of equal dignity and esteem for women. In the course of the escalating crisis in the Catholic church, they are jointly determined to put an end to abuse, clericalism and a patriarchal church which does not give women equal and self-determined status. A place which recent research on the Bible and church history also grants them. The signs of the times must be recognised and reflected in teaching. The teaching of the church is not a collection of traditional forms of faith, but rather must speak anew into our time the primeval trust that God is on our side, so that the church has a future.

Time is pressing

Many opportunities were missed, some see the Synodal Path as a "last chance". The ZdK paper "Dialogue instead of refusing dialogue" (1992), which already called for a farewell to

clericalism, patriarchy and centralism, the church petition We Are Church 1995 with 1.8 million signatures, the non-binding "dialogue/talk process" (2011-2015) of the German bishops and many other reform processes and initiatives of the past decades - they all remained without official church consequences. In 2008 the bishops rejected the proposal of the "Joint Conference" for a "Future Forum". Reform groups such as "We Are Church" were not included either in the 2011-2015 discussion process or in the Synodal Path.

The Synodal Path is and must be a rocky road. Only when real repentance, conversion and reorientation are discernible after a thorough debate, and when concrete changes are implemented, does the established church deserve to be given credibility again. There is no alternative. A fundamental change in teaching and structure, in theology and pastoral care is urgently needed if Christianity is to continue to be relevant to people in the future. Time is pressing. The window of opportunity for the church to regain its credibility is closing. Only together as church people and church leadership can we shape the future of the church in such a way that it can once again become home to many: a church of believers, of those who hope and of those who love, which takes up the themes of people today, namely worldwide solidarity and the preservation of creation. Let us search together for new paths which we can take with confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit; for paths which many who despair at today's church can follow, for they have not given up faith in the good news of the kingdom of God; for paths which can also inspire young people and young adults. Let us think the impossible: He who has no utopia is no realist. Let us here in Germany help Pope Francis, who wants a synodal church at all levels!

All those who still fundamentally doubt the necessity of the Synodal Path should become aware of the deep crisis of trust and credibility caused by the sexualised violence against children, young people, seminarians, women and even religious women which has been practised and covered up for decades. We must agree with Prof. Thomas Söding, who said at the first synodal assembly: "We will not solve all the problems of the Catholic Church in the synodal assembly. But we have to start there where we can burn our fingers".

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