

The Synodal Path

A path of conversion and renewal in the Catholic Church in Germany

1. The process

The Synodal Path in Germany is one of the first synodal awakenings in the universal Church that courageous Christians, bishops and lay people alike, are engaging in together. It is an attempt to confront the systemic causes of abuse and its concealment, which have caused untold suffering to so many people in the Church and through the Church. The situation of the Church at present points once again to the fact that awakening is often part and parcel of a process of moving on. The life of the Church today is marked by numerous abandonments: Baptised people are leaving the house of God because they are experiencing discrimination, exploitation and abuse. They feel that the Gospel does not liberate them, but is a burden, that it brings pain and lasting agony. It is to them, the abused, the wounded and the silenced, that the voice of God's people is foremost directed. Based on the Study on Abuse (MHG Study 2018), we have agreed to draw consequences from the dark stains on the life of the Church: We need to reflect anew on the Gospel of Jesus Christ in order to proclaim it credibly; we need to take steps of lived faith in order to ultimately walk together the path that the Church requires in the world today in order to be able to be Herself.

The Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Dr. Georg Bätzing, also recalled how important the abuse scandal is as a starting point for the Synodal Path in his reply letter to Bishop Gądecki: "Only if we address the systemic causes of the unspeakable suffering brought upon people by representatives of the Church, mostly priests, will it be possible at all to reopen the space in which a proclamation of the Gospel meets with open ears."

The spirit of *communio* is clearly felt in the Synodal Assemblies in Frankfurt. It is possible to walk the path of conversion and renewal together in accompanying prayer, in spiritual observance, in struggling, and in questions and possible approaches for action, in listening to one another, in sharing the bread with people who have been baptised with the same Spirit (cf. Mark 1:8 parr.).

The **aim** of the Synodal Path is to create the conditions and possibilities for experiencing God, to open up and strengthen spaces and structures for people and their different charisms, so that they can be missionaries of the Gospel of Jesus. At the centre are the questions: What does God expect from us as a Church today? How can we credibly proclaim the Gospel in view of the suffering that people in and outside the Church cause and experience? What do church structures have to look like in order to bestow an orientation on Christians? How do we recognise the will of the Holy Spirit, and how do we ourselves become its living fruits?

We are not guided in our struggle by short-lived sociological theories or secular ideologies, but rather we take as an orientation the central sources of knowledge of the faith: Scripture

and tradition, the Magisterium and theology, as well as the sense of faith of the faithful and the signs of the times, interpreted in the light of the Gospel. This basic orientation determines the considerations of the Synodal Path, as part of a careful theological reflection.

2. The synodal tradition in Germany

It is also important to note in this context that we in Germany have a long synodal tradition. Taking up the Second Vatican Council, many ideas were developed in the Würzburg Synod (1971-1975) which have led to a very lively, diverse synodal landscape.

In the Joint Conference, a regular consultation between bishops and lay people's representatives from the dioceses and from the many Catholic associations which exist in Germany, and which contribute so much to the life of the Catholic Church, has been taking place for decades at the level of the Bishops' Conference.

We are therefore building on a living tradition, and at the same time realise that this needs further development. Our actions are guided in particular by the inspiration given by Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, and the impulses arising from the most recent World Synods of Bishops (Synod on the Family and Synod on Young People).

3. The organisation

The 230 members of the Synodal Assembly include selected representatives of Catholics in Germany (members of the Committee of German Catholics [ZdK] and other individuals), the German bishops and other clergy. The Synodal Assembly is to meet five times over the course of four years to discuss substantive progress and ultimately translate it into concrete decisions. The Magisterium and jurisdiction of the bishops are to remain affected by this. Questions which concern the universal Church and which could possibly also be decided by a Council will be submitted to Pope Francis and the Roman dicasteries. Various bodies have been formed so that the Synodal Path can address the systematic causes in a structured manner. These include the four Synodal Forums, which will be preparing the content of the decisions. 30-35 members per forum are working on the following groups of topics:

4. The topics

Synodal Forum I: Power and separation of powers in the Church

The forum questions the relationship between the Church and power: How does the Church deal with power? How can abuse of power be prevented? What structures are needed in order to make the Church's actions more transparent?

Important key issues are the participation of qualified women and men in ecclesial offices and services. Questions of delegation of responsibilities in leadership positions are also part of this group of topics, as are structural changes in administration in Church institutions, some of which are already anchored in church law and need to be improved.

Synodal Forum II: Priestly existence today

The members of the second Forum are aware of the change in the form taken by the priestly existence. They ask what priests' way of life can look like in the future. There is no question that priests are needed in the Catholic Church – but how is the conception of the priest to be shaped today? The Forum reflects on the understanding of ministry – in the light of the tradition of the Church, but also under the changed conditions of the time. What is the relationship between ministers and the common priesthood? What approaches are needed in vocational pastoral care in order to do justice to the mission of the Church in today's world?

Synodal Forum III: Women in services and offices in the Church

The question of the role of women in the Church is a controversial matter. As committed women in leadership positions show time and again, the Church would not exist without them. The question arises in view of the various charisms, services and offices: Is the joint commitment of women and men in the Church sufficiently recognised and appreciated? Is the priesthood necessarily linked to gender? Questions such as these anticipate the need for a debate at universal Church level. The Amazon Synod has recently shown how relevant the issue is, and how much potential lies in developing a profile specifically for women in the Church.

Synodal Forum IV: Life in succeeding relationships – Living love in sexuality and partnership

Since the Church's sexual teaching is in a state of flux (as is the Church as a whole), is becoming less and less important, and offers an orientation to only a small number of baptised people, there is a need for a reorientation of the theological interpretations. The members of Forum IV consider what pastoral care of the family can look like today – in view of the different models of family – and seek ways to strengthen the marriage sacrament. They are asking how to address extramarital partnerships, reflecting on how to deal with homosexual people within the Church, and seeking ways to integrate transsexual, intersexual and queer people, who often feel rejected by their family, the Catholic Church.

5. Orientation text

The "orientation text" introduced by the Synodal Committee was adopted by more than 80 percent of the members of the Synodal Assembly, including more than 70 percent of the German bishops. What applies to everyone is: This is the common matrix for thinking, deliberating and deciding with one another.

The point of this orientation text is: Synodality is not only a topic, but also the form of theology. Firstly, it describes the processual nature of the Path: Catholic teaching, morality and discipline do not remain locked in the past, but develop continuously. There is a

“hermeneutics of reform” (Benedict XVI) that comes from an orientation towards the living faith. Secondly, synodal dynamism only exists in what we have in common. Pope Francis has said, not only with regard to Latin America: It must not only be the elite – neither the bishops nor the theology – who determine the direction; rather, God’s people must have their say, first and foremost the poor. John Paul II, who is quoted in the orientation text, said that this sense of faith expresses itself in the “truth of conscience”. It is therefore necessary to speak about Holy Scripture and tradition as places of knowledge of theology in such a way that the sense of faith of the people of God is enhanced. The Bible must be interpreted and translated; the tradition must be continually worked on. This all remains so much paper if it does not touch people’s hearts. They live their faith “today” – in the midst of the Church and in the midst of the world, often as seekers and doubters, but in Jesus’ promise that God’s Spirit will guide them to all truth (John 16:13). They have an intuition for the “signs of the times”. They are God’s finger pointing in the midst of present-day phenomena. The task of the *Magisterium* is to initiate and secure this dynamic process of mutual relationships, of discoveries and limitations, for the sake of the unity of faith, which is manifold in itself. Theology has the task of analysing these relationships and making clear alternatives, in service to the sense of faith of the people of God and in a dialogue with the Magisterium that is as respectful as it is frank. Without prayer and spirituality, the text remains a text. We therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for His working in our thoughts and actions.

6. The dates of the Synodal Assemblies

The Third Synodal Assembly of the Synodal Path was held in Frankfurt am Main from 3 to 5 February 2022. We discussed texts at second reading, and made decisions of the Synodal Path for the first time at Frankfurt Trade Fair Centre. These included the orientation text of the Synodal Presidium (“On the Church’s path of conversion and renewal”), which sets out the fundamental theology, the basic text on power and separation of powers, and the first action text on the “Involvement of the faithful in the appointment of the diocesan bishop”. Further texts were discussed at first reading and passed on to the Synodal Forums for further revision.

Preparations are currently underway for the Fourth Synodal Assembly, which will be held in Frankfurt from 8 to 10 September 2022. The Synodal Committee decided in December 2021 to extend the process until the spring of 2023, partly due to the COVID pandemic and the delays that this caused. The last Synodal Assembly will therefore be held from 9 to 11 March 2023.

7. The outlook

The orientation text stresses the community of dialogue as a central element:

“The Synodal Path is a dialogue carried out in an attitude of faith, leading to listening and seeing, to judging and acting. It develops from the assessments and points of view of all

members of the Synodal Assembly. At the same time, it lives from a readiness to open up to new insights and to permit itself to be defined by them. It also lives from regularly seeking dialogue with new people and groups, within and outside the Church. The bishops are important participants in the discourse. They exercise the ministry of unity. They form an indispensable bridge within their diverse local churches. But they also constitute an essential link to the universal Church and to the Bishop of Rome, to whom they are bound, both personally and in the collegiality of all bishops. However, they do not stand alone, but rather they are connected with their faithful.”

As a local church in Germany, we are always connected to the universal Church, and know that we are part of the great network of that universal Church. We are encouraged by the words of Pope Francis, who has encouraged us in his Letter of 2019 (“Letter to the pilgrim people of God”) in our aspiration to seek “a frank response to the present situation”. The Synodal Path considers itself to be subject to this responsibility.

In the hope and firm trust in the truthfulness of Jesus’ promise “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), we take up the challenge to bring light into the darkness of the world. We are happy that more sisters and brothers not only accompany us on our journey by interceding, but also walk with us on this Path as brothers and sisters in order to fulfil Christ’s mission. Many have already joined the fellowship: The Latin American continent and the Caribbean are in the process of a synodal awakening with the Ecclesial Assembly in Mexico. Australia is embarking on a new synodal path, and other European countries such as Ireland have also taken the first steps towards a synodal Church. We are all together observing the World Synod of Bishops on synodality that has begun, and are getting involved. The members of the Synodal Path deliberately enter into a dialogue with other countries because various cooperations with international working groups have shown that dialogue is indispensable in the universal Church. On the contrary, it is in sharing the mission of Jesus Christ that we learn from one another, and this helps bring about active synodality.

Our voices are a sign of our unity, and they reflect the Pope’s desire, namely that we share in the one mission.