



FAQ Synodal Path

What is that? Terms and explanations

Joint Conference

The Joint Conference was established after the Würzburg Synod (1971-1975) and has since comprised representatives of the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK). It meets twice a year in order to discuss topics and tasks which both bodies face together. It consists of ten bishops and ten lay representatives.

Synodal Assembly (Plenary session/Plenaries)

The Synodal Assembly is the supreme body of the Synodal Path and takes the decisions. It includes the members of the German Bishops' Conference, 69 members of the Central Committee of German Catholics as well as further representatives of spiritual services and church offices, young people and other personalities.

Synodal Forums

To deal with the content work of the Synodal Path, four Synodal Forums are set up. They develop the proposals for the Synodal Assembly. Until September 2019 there have been four Forums which have worked in preparation for the Synodal Path ("Power, Participation, Separation of Powers", "Sexual Morality", "Priestly Form of Life" and "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church"). The Synodal Forums continue these themes and will be called "Power and Separation of Powers in the Church - Joint Participation and Involvement in the Mission", "Life in succeeding relationships - Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership", "Priestly Existence Today" and "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" in the future.

Synodal Committee

The Synodal Committee is responsible for the preparation and follow-up of the Synodal Assemblies. It includes the President and the Vice-President of the German Bishops' Conference and the President and the Vice-President of the Central Committee of German Catholics.

Statutes

The statutes of the Synodal Path regulate the interaction of the bodies of the Synodal Path. They have come into force at the end of November 2019 after adoption by the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics.

Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK)

The Central Committee of German Catholics (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken) (ZdK) is the association of representatives of the Diocesan Councils, of the Catholic societies and organizations, as well as of institutions of the lay apostolate and other public figures from Church and society. The bodies of the Central Committee are the Plenary Assembly, the Main Committee, the Board and the President.

Time schedule

When does the Synodal Path start?

The Synodal Path has begun on 1 December 2019 (1 Advent and beginning of the new ecclesiastical year). Before this there has been a time of preparation after the German Bishops' Conference decided on a structured path together with the Central Committee of German Catholics. Here a new attitude is expressed which is inherent in the synodality of the Church: Together, with one another, for one another!

How long will the Synodal Path last?

The current planning and preparations for the Synodal Path envisage a duration of two years without formally setting this deadline. This should create flexibility/openness for the common struggle for answers to the challenges which became clear with the evaluation of the study "Sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests, deacons and male members of orders in the domain of the German Bishops' Conference" (MHG study).

How long do the individual phases take? What are the important landmarks?

No exact duration is foreseen for the individual phases in order to create flexibility and openness for the common struggle for answers to the challenges. Landmarks of the Synodal Path are both the Synodal Assemblies, in which the Synodal Forums present the results of their deliberations, which are discussed and decided upon, and elements of the participation of the People of God in accompanying events at diocesan and national levels.

When will there be "results" - at the end or also in between?

The Synodal Path is a process that has not yet been fully defined. In connection with this, decisions can also be brought about along the way. In this respect, decisions may be taken "along the way" and "at the end". The developments and results of the process are communicated transparently and comprehensibly through the homepage and other formats.

Structures and processes

Why has the Synodal Path been decided on and not a Synod?

Why a Synodal Path: At its Spring Plenary Assembly 2019 in Lingen, the German Bishops' Conference decided to "embark on a Synodal Path" together with the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK). The "Synodal Path" is not a (canonically) defined format, but one of its own kind (*sui generis*). It can also be shaped in the process of walking along the Path.

This corresponds to the demand on the Synodal Path which Cardinal Reinhard Marx formulated for the Bishops' Conference following the Lingen Plenary Assembly: "Faith can only grow and deepen if one becomes free from thinking blockades, if one faces up to the free and open debate and develops the ability to take new positions and to go new ways".

In his letter to the "Pilgrim People of God in Germany", Pope Francis writes on 29 June 2019: "It is essentially a *synodos*, a common path under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But that means going out together with the whole Church under the light of the Holy Spirit, under His guidance and rousing, to learn to listen and to recognize the ever-new horizon He wants to give us."

The binding nature of the findings of such a path is the responsibility of all those who are officially involved in it. Depending on the matter, the Apostolic See and/or the local bishop are responsible for the implementation.

Why not a Synod: A Synod is a format clearly defined by canon law, in which everything is regulated from the setting of topics to the constitution of the participants and their competences. A Synod requires the approval of the Holy See, which can often only be given after a longer-term procedure. This slows down the necessary speed in dealing with the issues at hand.

In the current situation, a Synodal Path *sui generis* initiates a concentrated debate on the current challenges. It makes it possible to discover an "extended horizon" that opens up new spaces in which innovative action can be taken.

What distinguishes the Synodal Path from the 2011-2015 discussion process (so called Gesprächsprozess)?

The Synodal Path is designed as a format "between" a Synod and the discussion process as it was initiated by the German Bishops' Conference in the years 2011 to 2015 as a spiritual process. At that time - starting from different perspectives - the question should be pursued which challenges the Church faced in her essential self-actualizations and which relation existed thereby to the landmark statements of the Second Vatican Council. In that format, the laity only had an advisory function with regard to the bishops. No binding decisions were taken.

In addition, two partners, i.e. the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), are working together on the Synodal Path. Their cooperation is regulated by clear structures to which all are bound. The partners are aware that concrete decisions should be taken.

What is the content of the Statutes of the Synodal Path?

The Statutes of the Synodal Path are regulating the topics, the channels of participation and decision-making structures as well as the publication of results and resolutions. A Synodal Assembly, various Synodal Forums and a Synodal Committee are fixed. In addition to members of the Synodal Path, these include other experts and consultants. The Synodal Path is led by a Committee which is composed equally of members of the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK). The Apostolic Nuncio, representatives of the non-Catholic churches as well as of the Bishops' Conferences and supra-regional lay organizations of the neighbouring states are invited to take part in the plenary sessions with the right to speak. Further details will be laid down in the rules of procedure which are currently being drawn up.

Who decides on the final version of the Statutes of the Synodal Path?

The Statutes have been prepared by the Joint Conference (Gemeinsame Konferenz) which consists of members of the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and which was established after the Würzburg Synod (1971-1975). The German Bishops' Conference adopted the Statutes at its Plenary Assembly in September 2019. The ZdK adopted the Statutes at the General Assembly in November 2019.

Who does the Synodal Assembly of the Synodal Path consist of?

The composition of the Synodal Assembly is regulated by the statutes. All (arch)bishops and auxiliary bishops and a corresponding number of representatives from the Central Committee of German Catholics have been appointed (the ZdK represents the diocesan councils, institutions and associations as well as individuals from the whole Church in Germany). In addition, ecclesial professional groups are represented, as well as religious orders and employees of diocesan administrations. The "young generation" will be represented by 15 Catholic faithful who are under 30 years old at the beginning of the Synodal Path. Gender and generational justice will be taken into account when the members are elected.

What is the role of the Preparatory Forums as regards the Synodal Path?

Four Forums that worked until September 2019 had been set up to prepare the Synodal Path. These Forums elaborated texts which were discussed during the extended Joint Conference from 13 - 14 September 2019 in Fulda, and have since been made available on the Internet as draft versions. These are preparatory working papers which will be used in the deliberations of future Synodal Assemblies. The four Forums established so far, dealt with the topics of "Power, Participation and Separation of Powers", "Sexual morality", "Priestly form of Life" and "Women in ministries and offices in the Church". The Synodal Forums continue these topics and they will be called "Power and Separation of Powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the Mission", "Life in succeeding relationships - Living love in sexuality and partnership", "Priestly existence today" and "Women in ministries and offices in the Church".

How are the members of the Synodal Forums elected?

The members of the Synodal Forums are elected at the constituent session of the first Synodal Assembly by the members of the Synodal Assembly. The Synodal Committee submits a proposal to the Synodal Assembly, including proposals from the chairpersons of the preparatory Forums, taking into account observations of the members of the Synodal Assembly. The Synodal Forums shall comprise about 30 members. When filling the positions, care is taken to include a broad spectrum of backgrounds, skills and perspectives. Bishops, religious and parish priests as well as parish assistants, professors, representatives of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and lay organizations and other organizations should meet in the Forums.

Who decides on the implementation of the results of the Synodal Path?

The German Bishops' Conference and each individual diocesan bishop may adopt the decisions of the Synodal Assembly concerning a matter whose legal regulation at the level of the particular Church falls within their respective authority and competence. Decisions acquire legal effect if they are published as General Decrees of the German Bishops' Conference in the Official Gazette of the President or as diocesan laws by the respective diocesan bishop in the diocesan Official Gazette. The Apostolic See decides on the implementation of decisions which are of universal church relevance.

What is the role of the Vatican and the Pope as regards the Synodal Path?

In his letter of 29 June 2019, to the "Pilgrim People of God in Germany", the Pope gave an answer to this question. In the opening of his letter the Pope writes about his motive: "I (...) want to be close to you and share your concern for the future of the Church in Germany. We are all aware that we are living not only in a time of change, but rather in a turning point in history that raises new and old questions, in the face of which a debate is justified and necessary". How the curial administration is to be integrated depends on the potential scope of the decisions/recommendations of the Synodal Path.

Content/Topics

Which concrete topics and questions are discussed and answered?

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany serves the common search for steps to strengthen Christian witness. The aim is to clarify central areas of concern:

- "Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission"
The Synodal Path deals on the one hand with the issue of the clerical abuse of power. It aims to clarify what needs to be done to achieve the necessary reduction of power and to establish a more just and legally binding order. The establishment of administrative courts is part of this.

- "Life in succeeding relationships - Living love in sexuality and partnership"

Another topic of the Synodal Path is the sexual morality of the Church. From the point of view of many baptized persons this has not sufficiently received decisive insights from theology and human sciences. The personal meaning of sexuality does not receive sufficient attention. The result: The proclamation of morality does not give orientation to the vast majority of the baptized.

- "Priestly existence today"

The Synodal Path asks how we want to be Christians in Germany today and which ministries and ways of life serve the mission of the Church in the world. Celibacy is highly valued as an expression of the personal relationship with Jesus Christ. How far it must belong to the witness of the priest in the Church will be discussed.

- "Women in ministries and offices in the Church"

In addition, the Synodal Path will discuss the question of the role of women in the Church. The Synodal Path is about bringing the relevance of faith and Church back into the social debate and at the same time finding answers to questions within the Church. This is only possible in a community of women and men in the Church.

Is the further analysis of the abuse scandal also a task of the Synodal Path?

The Synodal Path came into being due to the results of the MHG study. This means: On the one hand, because of the study there are clear tasks which continuously play a role in the processing of the topic and which are already under way and therefore not part of the Synodal Path. On the other hand, it will be necessary and right to include the perspective of those affected by sexual abuse in the work of the Synodal Forums.

How will the Pope's letter be integrated into the Synodal Path? What is the meaning of the letter for the Synodal Path?

The letter has a special meaning for the foundation of the Path, its spiritual dimension. This is the meaning of the Pope's letter: A true encouragement for the common struggle for a successful proclamation of the Gospel in the face of the crisis of faith and abuse in our cultural area. The Pope's warning is taken up that the process must not engage in structural debates, but should be a process guided by the Spirit of God. However, those aspects which concern the universal church level are not subject to a ban on discussion. They are reflected against the background of the proclamation of faith in Germany and the results, possibly combined with a vote for action, are transmitted to the Vatican.

What is the aim of the Synodal Path?

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany serves the common search for steps to strengthen Christian witness. The aim is to clarify central fields of action: "Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission", "Living love in sexuality and partnership", "Priestly existence today", "Women in ministries and offices in the Church".

What is the role of Evangelization as regards the Synodal Path?

Evangelization is the overarching goal of the Synodal Path. It is expressed in the question of the relevance of faith and the Church today. However, the Synodal Path must look for answers to urgent questions in order to overcome the crises of faith and abuse.

What questions of content will the German Catholic Church not be able to answer conclusively or alone?

Questions that concern not only a diocese or the community of German dioceses, but the Universal Church, must be placed in the supra-diocesan context and find their answers in it. Such decisions are transmitted to the Apostolic See as a vote of the Synodal Path.

What does “binding” decisions mean? What questions can be discussed, what cannot be decided?

Binding decisions are made by the bodies of the Synodal Path through their regulated voting procedures. All pending questions can be brought in and discussed without restriction in the process of the Synodal Path and can also be transformed into a draft resolution.

Questions that concern the Universal Church, i.e. not only a diocese or the community of German dioceses, must be placed in the supra-diocesan context and find their answers in it. In this respect there can be decisions which are addressed to Rome as a vote of the Church in Germany. Beyond that it is to be noted: In every (arch)diocese the local bishop is ultimately the one who takes the decisions within the framework of his rights and duties.

Participation und Communication

Where can you get information about the Synodal Path?

Since 1 Advent 2019, the platform www.synodalerweg.de is providing continuous and transparent information about the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany.

How will the “Pilgrim People of God” be integrated into the Synodal Path? Can you participate as parish, prayer community or as a Catholic?

Since we are dealing with a Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany, it is important that the common struggle is not only supported by two institutions, but by the “Pilgrim People of God in Germany”. For this it is necessary that the individual parts of the constituted Church and the Catholic associations and movements get involved in their own way: be it concretely through the participation of a representative in the Synodal Path, be it through written statements and comments on the events, be it through participation in information events (e.g. Catholic Academies), through media interaction (Social Media) or also through intercessory prayer. A kind of participation you can find here.

To whom and where can interested parties send their opinions and questions? Who will answer them?

For the Synodal path has been set up a Secretariat that is dealing with the recording and answering of opinions and statements. This is possible by e-mail (kontakt@synodalerweg.de) and Facebook.

How can the interested public participate in the content-related discussions held in the Synodal Forums?

On the one hand, the interested public can take part in the content-related discussions via the events accompanying the Synodal Path. In addition, the Synodal Path offers the opportunity to contribute content via e-mail and a contact form on its website.

How regularly is information provided about the discussions in the Forums?

The Synodal Path should be characterized by transparency. Therefore, the meetings of the Synodal Assembly, in which the work of the Forums will be presented, will be open to the media. Since 1 Advent 2019, the platform www.synodalerweg.de is providing continuous and transparent information about the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany.

What is the purpose of the accompanying events?

The accompanying events are intended to enable the interested public to participate in the discussions of the Synodal Path. The aim is above all to ensure the broadest possible involvement of Catholics.