



Transparency and responsibility

A statement of the Synodal Committee:

Resolute action against sexual abuse and violence in the Church

The MHG study has shown the disturbing extent of sexualised violence in the sphere of the Church over many years. The study has also shown that church leaders have covered up misconduct and crimes. For both - the abuse and its cover-up - the study not only identified culpable behaviour of individuals, but also causes and facilitating factors that are rooted in church structures and thought patterns: Concentration of power among the clergy, exaltation of the priestly ministry, male-bonding forms of behaviour and problems with the Church's sexual morality. Under the impression of this study, the German Bishops' Conference has asked the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) to participate in a reform process that should draw consequences from the undesirable developments and irregularities.

Hence the Synodal Path, a joint action of the Catholic Church in Germany, came into being. Bishops, priests and religious, elected and appointed delegates from parishes, Catholic associations and organisations, from theology and society consult with each other. The Synodal Path needs open discussion, spiritual discernment and clear decisions. We want to resolutely counteract systemic wrong developments.

Along this path we need to listen to those affected. We are grateful that those affected want to contribute to the deliberations of the Synodal Path. The Synodal Committee would therefore like to structurally incorporate the participation of affected persons' representatives in the Synodal Path. We have offered the advisory council of those affected to agree on the exact form of participation in a discussion between representatives of the advisory council, the Synodal Committee and the Special Commissioner of the German Bishops' Conference on all questions relating to sexual abuse.

The German Bishops' Conference and the dioceses, as well as numerous Catholic organisations, have already implemented or initiated a number of projects that focus on the victims of abuse and help to prevent future offences and crimes. This concerns prevention, the (also material) recognition of suffering, education and coming to terms with the past, as well as changing priorities, reporting procedures and administrative processes. This path must continue.

Nevertheless, no one can overlook the fact that the process of reappraisal, for which the individual dioceses bear responsibility, is experiencing crisis-like escalations. The events in the Archdiocese of Cologne concerning the commissioning, non-publication and re-commissioning of expert opinions have led many to doubt the will of church authorities to unreservedly clarify the situation. Regardless of the question of the goodwill of those involved, regardless of intentions, motives and the assessment of individual facts: Considerable irritations have arisen and a loss of trust has occurred that will be difficult to repair.

Not a few leave the church as a result of this.

We want to clarify:

1. Infractions of the law, conduct contrary to one's duty and procedural errors must be punished everywhere in conformity with the law and without regard to the person, as also provided for in the "Regulation for dealing with sexual abuse of minors and of vulnerable adults by clergy and other Church staff".
2. All those who bear leadership responsibility in dioceses, religious orders and church organisations have a duty to carry out a comprehensive legal, historical, ethical and theological reappraisal - in accordance with the "Joint Declaration on Binding Criteria and Standards for an Independent Assessment of Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church in Germany" issued by the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues (UBSKM) and the German Bishops' Conference in June 2020. The assessment must meet the legitimate expectations of those affected and must be carried out in an independent manner. Structures of cover-up must be uncovered and eliminated, the names of those responsible must be given, the results of the investigations must be made public. This process has already been initiated in many places, but it must become standard throughout the Church. Even those who do not hold a church leadership position must ask themselves critically to what extent their actions, their omissions and their silence have encouraged abuse and cover-ups.
3. All those who exercise leadership in the Church must bear the consequences and, if necessary, take them themselves if they have broken the law, violated their duties or made serious mistakes in dealing with abuse. In this context, resignation cannot be taboo. A legal assessment is indispensable, but not sufficient. It must be self-evident that those responsible must be judged by legal, canonical, moral and spiritual standards associated with their offices.
4. All bishops must establish binding procedures to be publicly accountable to the people of the Church. For they bear responsibility not only towards the Pope and the College of Bishops, but also towards the faithful in their diocese and beyond for the Church in our country and worldwide. In order to exercise his office, a bishop needs the trust of the faithful of his diocese.

Pope Francis wrote: "The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful." He demands a conversion of hearts and procedures "to prevent and combat these crimes that betray the trust of the faithful." (Vos estis lux mundi). In this sense we are also challenged on the Synodal Path. We are serious about real change that is guided by the standards of the Gospel. We ask those affected by abuse and violence to look critically at our path. We are working to develop forms, structures and attitudes in the Church that prevent and avoid attacks against human dignity.

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