



Implementation text

The celibacy of priests - strengthening and opening

Decision of the Synodal Path adopted by the Synodal Assembly on March 9, 2023

a) Statements on celibacy among diocesan priests

Introduction

(1) The matter of priestly celibacy concerns many among the faithful. The text therefore makes transparent the "discernment of spirits", in the sense of a spiritual method of self-examination.

Our reflections are headed by a seven-fold "affirmation":

(2) Affirmation of the sacramentality of the Church.

(3) Affirmation of a sacramental priesthood, which is just as constitutive for our Catholic Church as is the common priesthood of all who are baptised, in the service of which the sacramental priesthood stands.

(4) Affirmation of the fact that people may experience priests who can promise them salvation, which God wants to give, and make it tangible in the ups and downs of human existence.

(5) Affirmation of the priestly ministry allowing the abiding presence and working of Jesus Christ to be experienced in many ways throughout the world.

(6) Affirmation that this ministry is to shape people's entire lives and existence in such a way that it can be experienced as an authentic witness of life.

(7) Affirmation of a priestly way of life which is shaped by the evangelical counsels - poverty, obedience and chastity, or celibacy.¹ We are primarily talking about celibacy here.

(8) Affirmation of the fact that the celibacy of a diocesan priest can be an appropriate witness, a real symbol of the orientation of life towards the Lord and for the people. This is embedded within a long tradition, in spiritual experience, and in the community-creating strength of opting for a celibate life which unites large numbers of priests.

¹ See Chapter 5.4 The evangelical counsels in the foundational text of Synodal Forum II.

(9) *There is a perceptible restlessness among God's people that has been going on for many decades. It is becoming stronger rather than weaker. This unease relates not so much to celibacy itself. As every way of life, celibacy has its strengths and weaknesses, moments of joy and moments of renunciation, life-enhancing aspects, and dangers.*

(10) The many difficulties of living in celibacy outside of communities are only to be touched on here. They include loneliness, the danger of addiction, unresolved issues related to old age, etc. We also perceive malformations of a life of celibacy. The mainstays of celibacy have fallen away, so that it has become a precarious way of life for some. For example, the living together of several people, often related to the priest, in the large presbytery no longer exists. The cohabitation of several priests in the presbytery of large parishes or of associations (*vita communis*) has also become rare. What is more, the virtual disappearance of the long-valued service of parish housekeepers living in the presbytery together with the priests has consequences that need to be considered. The viability of celibacy, involving integration into a parish family, was part of its justification in training for the priesthood for decades. This has disappeared in the large parishes, as has the often-mentioned diversity in encounters with the different generations of a parish. All these points require lifelong work on relational skills. Whilst this is primarily the responsibility of the priest, it also needs to be made possible through training, professional development, superiors and church regulations. It would go beyond the limits of this implementation text to take a differentiated look at all these issues.

(11) *Our unease about celibacy is therefore not about celibacy per se. It concerns the question of whether this celibacy must be affirmed by all who wish to become priests, or whether there is not a need for different choices to be available. Inner unease, as well as inner peace, are signs in the tradition of the discernment of spirits that need to be taken seriously. Such a discernment needs to be carried out because God can work through it and in it. Could it be that God is seeking to point us in a particular direction through this very unease? It is the following aspects to which we refer in concrete terms:*

(12) Celibacy is not the only appropriate witness for the discipleship of Jesus. Sacramental marriage, for instance, also points to God's love and unbreakable faithfulness towards His people, as it is already set out in Ephesians (Eph 5:31-32). It has not been possible since the Second Vatican Council at the latest to responsibly claim that a celibate way of life is of higher value.² Given their broad diversity, the vocations need and support one another. When marriage and celibacy are lived by priests, it enriches the witness of priestly life as a whole.

(13) For all the value of celibacy, there were also traditional lines of justification for celibacy that were motivated by hostility towards the body and sexuality. The idea of cultic purity, for example, is not a helpful category, and has contributed to a clericalistic glorification. There is

² Cf. inter alia: "Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect." (LG 11); "If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (cf. 2 Peter 1:1). And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ." (LG 32); "Thus in their diversity all bear witness to the wonderful unity in the Body of Christ. This very diversity of graces, ministries and works gathers the children of God into one, because "all these things are the work of one and the same Spirit" (1 Cor 12:11)." (LG 32).

also no longer any basis for the economic considerations that were important in the High Middle Ages (right of inheritance in view of benefices, etc.).

(14) In addition, we see men who discover in an intensive process - before or after their ordination to the priesthood - that they are called to marriage, and at the same time feel an inner vocation to enter the priesthood.³ Their gifts, which could complement those of celibate priests, are lost to our Church because their two vocations, namely to the priesthood and to marriage, are generally regarded in the Latin Church as being incompatible. We are therefore not doing sufficient justice to the charisms and vocations existing here, or to the pastoral needs of the faithful. Many would choose the priestly profession if it were not linked to this way of life.

(15) Just as the celibacy of priests has a long tradition in our Church, albeit it is not uninterrupted, this applies to the possibility and the reality of married priests. Founded in the Biblical witness (1 Tim 3 and frequently), married ministers are a blessed reality, not only in the Orthodox Churches, but also in the Eastern Catholic Churches. The admission of married men to priestly ordination is an exception in the Latin Church, but it is not unthinkable, especially since experience with them and with their acceptance on the part of the faithful is rather positive in many cases. The same applies to the priests from Eastern Catholic Churches who have long been living in some of our congregations. Taking the step towards an exemption from celibacy would therefore not be a departure into completely new territory.

(16) The obligation to observe celibacy poses a very real danger that it will only be accepted as a consequence of the choice of vocation. The claim that it is thus understood as a witness can hardly be fulfilled in these cases. Many priests who have already been ordained increasingly suffer from the general suspicion that they did not choose celibacy freely. Religious report that the reactions to their celibacy are much more positive, precisely because this choice is completely voluntary.

(17) To put it very simply, there is the danger that priests choose a profession which is then associated with a way of life they put up with. Religious, on the other hand, primarily choose a way of life which may then be associated with a profession. In addition, religious usually live in communities, and this communal life may mitigate some of the dangers of celibacy.

(18) Many in the Synodal Assembly are convinced that the abolition of the obligation of celibacy as a condition of admission to priestly ordination will make the unmarried state for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven more visible as a “special gift of God” (Can 277), and will enhance its symbolic character for the dawning Kingdom of God. How extensive such an opening of the priestly ministry for married men could be arranged, or what steps should be taken on this path, will have to be weighed up wisely.

(19) The abuse crisis has taught us that obligatory celibacy may attract a disproportionately large number of men who are unsure of their sexuality, of their sexual identity and orientation, and wish to avoid confronting it. The regressive immature type, as a third group of people accused of sexual assault, exhibits these characteristics.⁴ The MHG Study concludes from this

³ We are aware that there is also a question of homosexual priests. We refer to the following implementation text of Synodal Forum II: Breaking with taboos and normalisation - implementation text on the situation of homosexual priests.

⁴ Cf. in: “Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference” (MHG Study), 282.

that it is the obligation to observe celibacy - not celibacy per se - that might promote sexual abuse through these and other constellations.⁵

(20) At the same time, we also consider pastoral reality as it reveals itself to us to be a sign that there is a need for change. We see people who long to make use of priestly ministries, and of sacramental ones in particular. The sacramentality of the Church also gives rise to the need for priestly ministries, including and especially sacramental ones, while the number of those who can exercise this ministry is rapidly decreasing - in our country and also in other parts of the universal Church. This makes one wonder. The Church defines herself as the community that is gathered around the Eucharist as its centre. What if a community no longer has sufficient access to the Eucharist? Is it legitimate and meaningful to argue from a position of shortage? We believe that the shortage of priests is not the only reason, and that it is not the only decisive reason, for the desire to abolish obligatory celibacy. We however regard the pastoral distress brought about by the shortage of priests as a sign of the times that should be taken seriously. We believe that access to the celebration of the Eucharist, as well as to the sacraments of the anointing of the sick and forgiveness, is to be valued more highly than the obligation to maintain celibacy. The reduction in the number of priests due to celibacy is also affecting many who are already in the ministry (and are celibate), as they are increasingly overburdened and less and less able to live out their spirituality.

(21) The latter two facts, the experience of thousands of sexual abuses by celibate priests, and the pastoral distress, point in the same direction, and reinforce the weight of the argument, so that we come to the following conclusions in our discernment of spirits:

(22) The Church naturally has an obligation to ensure that the rules and regulations which she establishes serve the life of the people and evangelisation. Just as there is a theological hierarchy of truths, there are also precedences and subordinate orders that must always be newly weighted in the organisation of the salvific ministry in the Church. If obligatory celibacy hinders priests' witness and pastoral ministry, and the mission and credibility of the Church, this rule should be changed.

(23) We understand all these factors as signs of the times that make it necessary to adopt the following votes:

Vote 1

(24) The Synodal Assembly therefore asks the Holy Father to reconsider the connection of the conferral of ordination with the commitment to celibacy in the synodal process of the World Synod (2021-2024).

(25) Even if the concrete practice of the Eastern Catholic Churches in this area, for example with regard to the importance of monasticism, cannot be simply transferred to the reality of

⁵ Cf. inter alia in: "Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference" (MHG Study), 11; 12-13. This problem indicator is explicitly mentioned there, without offering suggestions for a solution. See on this also Chapter 3 Change structures that promote abuse and underlying topics of the foundational text. Other problem areas, such as inadequate personality development, etc., are dealt with in the implementation text entitled "Professionalisation" of the Synodal Forum "Priestly existence today". This must be taken seriously, even where abuse also occurs in non-celibate contexts. This is one potential danger, but by no means the only one.

the Latin Church, taking a look at the Eastern Church's tradition nonetheless shows that diversity in the shaping of the priestly way of life was and is always a real possibility for the Church.

Vote 2

(26) The Synodal Assembly now asks the Holy Father to take the following concrete step, pending the possible implementation of vote 1:

(27) Dispensations in individual cases, such as those granted to married Protestant pastors who have converted to the Catholic Church, are to be granted even more generously. The right to give such a dispensation is currently reserved to the Apostolic See (can. 1047 §2 No. 3). This reservation can be lifted for individual local churches if the respective local bishop so requests. This would require an appropriate intra-diocesan process and consultation with the Bishops' Conference. If the Apostolic See consents to this, the authority for a dispensation then lies with the local bishop, who is in a better position to assess the situation on the ground.

Vote 3

(28) The Synodal Assembly now asks the Holy Father to take the following concrete step, pending the possible implementation of vote 1: to allow the ordination of viri probati. Already the Würzburg Synode dealt with the ordination of viri probati. The Amazon Synod proposes to define as a first step criteria "to ordain as priests suitable and respected men of the community [...] who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate".⁶ Even though the diaconate is a vocation in its own right, this proposal shows the urgency to look for and implement new ways.

Vote 4

(29) The Synodal Assembly now asks the Holy Father to take the following concrete step, pending the possible implementation of vote 1:

(30) One might for instance consider particular-church arrangements, on the basis of which experience could first be gained in one region of the world as to how such an opening would affect priests who have already been ordained, priests who are to be ordained in the future, and last but not least the faithful and the witness of the Church.

(31) The Synodal Assembly calls upon the German Bishops' Conference to apply to the Apostolic See for the implementation of the concrete steps mentioned.

Vote 5

(32) The Synodal Assembly asks the Holy Father, after any general exemption from the vow of celibacy to examine whether also priests who have already been ordained might be given the possibility of being released from the vow of celibacy without having to renounce exercising the ministry.

⁶ Final Document of the Amazon Synod, 111.

b) Votes on priests leaving the ministry due to a partnership

Introduction

(33) Every employee or civil servant has to accept negative consequences associated with the premature termination of his/her employment as long as they are legally permissible. Not all of these can and must be absorbed by the previous employer. This also applies as a matter of principle to leaving the priestly ministry. That said, from a point of view of justice and legal certainty, this departure, which is more than a professional caesura pure and simple, entails disproportionate disadvantages.

(34) The reasons for leaving are quite varied. A significant majority however have to renounce the priestly ministry because of a partnership.

Vote 6

(35) The Synodal Assembly has requested the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics to commission a social science study on the situation of suspended and dispensed priests, and to present it to the public no later than 2024. The aim is a quantitative and qualitative survey of ecclesiastical, professional and family situations, as well as of individual personal faith biographies. It is also important to ascertain the willingness to continue in a pastoral profession, or even to become active in the priestly ministry.

Vote 7

(36) The Synodal Assembly calls upon the German Bishops' Conference,

a) to maintain an intensive exchange with suspended and dispensed priests and to counteract alienation.

b) to make it possible for dispensed priests to apply for all ecclesiastical vocations open to lay people. Integration into a pastoral ministry should be possible as in the renewed dispensation.⁷

(37) The Synodal Assembly has commissioned the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics to set up a working group, with the involvement of suspended and dispensed priests. It should be given the task

a) to collect best practice examples for a humanly convincing handling of suspended and dispensed priests on the part of the dioceses (regular invitations to joint exchange, in which also questions of involvement and committees, schemes, may be settled) and to pass these on to the dioceses for implementation and

b) to develop binding and legally secure regulations - oriented towards civil society standards - analogous to the leaving of other pastoral employees for the taking over of dispensed priests in pastoral ministry.

⁷ The question of an ecclesiastical perspective of a priest separated from ministry by dispensation is already given to the respective bishop by the new version of dispensation rescripts; this also includes positive appreciation and encouragement that the dispensed person contributes with his talents and gifts.