



## Implementation text

# Women in sacramental ministries - Perspectives for the universal church dialogue

Decision of the Synodal Path adopted by the Synodal Assembly on March 11, 2023

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### Introduction: Arguments in a universal church context

(1) In the context of the universal Church, theological arguments with regard to the participation of women in ministries and offices in the Church are presented and discussed in a controversial way. It is time to exchange insights in professionally qualified conversations at the international level constructively and with mutual respect. This concern is also expressed by voices in many local churches, which have been compiled in the working document for the continental stage of the worldwide synodal process under the title "'Enlarge the space for your tent' (Is 54:2)" (October 2022). There it is stated: "Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women" (No. 64). The report by the Holy Land Bishop's Conference says: "In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard." (No. 61). Expectations for a new reflection on women's ministries are expressed in the South as well as in the North, in the East as well as in the West of the universal Church. Distinctions in regard to specific issues are called for - also with regard to the diaconate and the ordination of women to the priesthood (cf. No. 64). The implementation text presented here also follows this insight.

(2) At theological training centres in German-speaking countries - at faculties and institutes - there has been a solid theological, philosophical and social-scientific debate in recent decades on questions of gender justice and the participation of women in all areas of church life, taking ecumenical aspects into account. In recent years, important studies have been presented on the ministry of the deaconess and on the representation of Christ in the sacramental office. We see the significance of the Synodal Path of our German local Church for the universal Church essentially in taking up these arguments and considering concrete consequences in the sense of gender justice.

(3) The "sensus fidelium" of the whole people of God, and here in particular that of women, may continue to be given space. In the women's associations and in initiatives of the faithful at the grassroots level, for decades there have been many voices in every age group that speak out in favour of opening up all ministries to women as well. We therefore submit to the Synodal Assembly a statement on the sacramental diaconate of women and a statement on how to deal with the debate on women's admission to the entire sacramental ministry.

(4) Women's access to the sacramental offices must also be considered from the point of view of equality. The position of the Church's teaching authority is becoming less and less convincing worldwide. There are calls worldwide for an end to unequal treatment on the basis of gender, which contributes to the Catholic Church's credibility deficit.

## Statements

### Opening of the Sacramental Diaconate for women

(5) The discussion about women's admission to the diaconate has been conducted in the German local church on a broad theological and ecclesial basis since Vatican Council II. With the establishment of the permanent diaconate as an independent sacramental ministry with an ordination "unto a ministry of service" (LG 29), the diaconal profile of the Church has been sharpened. The diaconate is understood as a special representation of the diaconal Christ within the framework of the one sacramental salvific ministry of the Church. The biblical writings testify to the activity of deaconesses in the early congregations. The records of early councils document forms for ordaining women deacons in liturgical celebrations. In the Eastern Christian churches the office of deaconess has long been preserved and is receiving renewed attention today. In view of the strong presence of women in very many different diaconal areas in voluntary and full-time ministries, the question of opening a diaconal ministry for women has arisen in recent years. Given the ever increasing professionalisation of the various diaconal activities, the danger of a divergence between Caritas and pastoral work must be countered. Diaconal practice is a form of proclamation of the Gospel, and conversely, the proclamation of the Gospel needs to be related to experiences in diakonia.

(6) With the admission of women to the diaconate many associate the strengthening of the basic charitable activity of the Church, which the Second Vatican Council emphasised as the third essential element of the Church's identity, alongside the task of evangelisation through the proclamation of the Word of God and the liturgical celebration of the sacraments. The Church becomes the Church of Jesus Christ when she makes God's mercy concrete in the footsteps of the "poor Jesus" (LG 8).

### Statement in the universal church context:

(7) The German bishops advocate that the regional bishops' conferences have a say in the appointment of members of papal or curial commissions to advise on questions of the diaconate to promote the positive opportunity presented by the diaconate of women. The results of work carried out by the commissions already established should be presented as soon as possible.

(8) In this context, the German bishops continue to advocate at the level of the universal Church and at the World Synod, the admission of women to the sacramental diaconate for all the particular Churches which desire this on the basis of their pastoral situation.

Statement in the context of the German local church:

(9) At the various levels of the German local church, in the dioceses and associations, in further training events for pastoral staff and in theological training at faculties and institutes, a deeper understanding of the diaconal nature of the Church is sought.

(10) In scientific-theological research, further research is being done on the diaconate from a sacramental-theological and diaconal-theological perspective. Special attention is to be paid to the diaconate of women, also in ecumenical conversation with the Orthodox churches and their experiences with ordained women deacons.

(11) Those responsible for the training and deployment of permanent deacons at the national level (Federal Working Group for the Permanent Diaconate) and, where possible, also in the dioceses, take note of the work of the 'Diaconate of Women' network in an appreciative way, enter into a lively exchange with those responsible for this network and integrate the experiences of the network's training courses into the local training of deacons in order to prepare a common training for a time when women will be admitted to the applicant circles.

Admission of women to the whole sacramental ministry

(12) With regard to the question of women's admission to the entire sacramental ministry, what was formulated as a mandate in the foundational text "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" (No. 1 with reference to No. 5.3) applies: "Therefore, the question must be addressed to the highest authority in the Church (Pope and Council) whether the teaching of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* should be reviewed: In the service of evangelisation it is a matter of enabling the appropriate participation of women in preaching, in the sacramental representation of Christ and in the building up of the Church. Whether or not the doctrine of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* binds the Church infallibly must then be examined and clarified bindingly at this level."

(13) The theological arguments presented so far in the present magisterial documents must therefore be subjected to a critical review in the context of the universal Church, in which the necessary scientific expertise must be obtained. In addition to the theological disciplines, philosophy as well as the cultural, historical and social sciences should also be involved in the process of reflection in view of hermeneutical pre-understanding. To this end, we want to integrate the pastoral considerations and theological research from the context of the German local church into the universal church discourse. We are encouraged to do this by the preparatory document for the Synod "Enlarge the space of your tent", which documents in No. 64 that this question is also being asked in "some areas" of the universal Church.

(14) There shall be established, as a form of continuing deliberation on the topics of the Synodal Path, a commission to deal exclusively with the subject of the sacramental ministry of persons of all sexes.

### **Reasoning**

(15) Many theologians working in academia - not only in Germany - state that there is a considerable discrepancy between various doctrinal arguments for the exclusion of women from the

sacramental ministry on the one hand and the findings from current research and teaching in theology that speak against it on the other.

(16) In the history of the Church, there have been several occasions to reconsider a doctrinal position once taken. The realization of the historicity of the knowledge of a religious truth is familiar to theological hermeneutics. Only an exchange of insights while practising all methods and including different theological, spiritual and pastoral views can be convincing today in view of the complexity of the topic.

(17) The Church is credible when she bears witness to God's mercy as a diaconal Church. People of all genders stand alongside those who are in need, who face violence, who are marginalised because of gender, social or ethnic affiliation. Opening the sacramental diaconate to women will contribute to this credibility and raise the diaconal profile of the Church. People of all genders are equally called to diaconal ministry. It is precisely the discussion of opening the sacramental diaconal ministry for women that offers the opportunity for a fundamental process of reflection on the sacramental structure of the Church. Such a path can also lead to the shaping of new forms of ministries and offices on the way to a fraternal Church.

(18) Women in the sacramental diaconate strengthen the "gaze of life" in the diversity of our realities of life and in this way can have a healing effect on the church and society. The theological argumentation continued on the Synodal Path in Germany with regard to the participation of women in the sacramental ministry presupposes that the doctrinal texts available so far have not reached the degree of final bindingness - or that in view of new insights and cultural developments such a binding nature must be reconsidered and, if necessary, revised. In the controversy surrounding this question, it should be thought-provoking that a large number of believers in Christ refuse to accept the assumption that only a man can preside over the Eucharistic liturgy because of his natural resemblance to Jesus. It is the task of the Magisterium to clarify the binding nature of the letter "Ordinatio sacerdotalis". Only then can the "sensus fidelium" ("sense of faith of the faithful" in the sense of LG 12) be understood as a "consensus fidelium" which, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, cannot err.

(19) It is the biblically attested doctrine that unity with Christ Jesus is grounded in baptism, which would eliminate the distinction according to gender as well as according to the religion of origin and social status on the level of salvation (cf. Gal 3:28). This results in a distinction, guided by the Holy Spirit, between the divine ground of salvation and the earthly form of the Church that has become historical as the place of experiencing a redeemed existence. In this context, the soteriological intention, i.e. the intention to redeem people through the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus is the guiding principle of the reflection: in following the Crucified, the God-man Christ Jesus, people give their lives day after day for the proclamation of the Gospel, they strengthen the Easter hope, they heal in spiritual needs and exhort to a life of love even towards those who are hostile. In their official ministry, they represent Christ Jesus, in that they are called, despite all human weakness, to constantly point to his presence. With their comprehensive spiritual and theological education, they encourage all people through their official proclamation to believe in Christ Jesus, to be baptised, to encounter Jesus Christ in the celebration of the sacraments and to act in a diaconal way.