



Preamble text

Listen, learn, taking new ways: The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany

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

(1) As a Synodal Assembly, we are walking a path of repentance and renewal. We face the criticism and the justified accusation of those affected by sexualised violence, abuse of power and its cover-up in the Church. We want to hear and proclaim the Gospel, God's good news, anew - in words and deeds. Thus, the Synodal Path will serve the cause of evangelisation. It is indispensable to openly confess guilt and also to analyse the structural causes of this guilt.

(2) The Church in this country and in these times is looking for a path to connect in a new way with the existential questions of the people of today and thus learn to perceive the mission of evangelisation in a new manner. For those who want to proclaim the Gospel must first hear it anew themselves and allow themselves to be changed by it. At the same time, the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany should contribute to the Synodal Path of the Universal Church, to which Pope Francis has invited all the faithful at Pentecost 2021. In 2019, he encouraged the "pilgrim people of God in Germany" in his letter, „walking together and with the whole Church under the Spirit's light and guidance, to be invaded by the Spirit, to learn to listen and discern the ever new horizon that is always on offer." With this, Pope Francis also links the call to seek "a frank response to the present situation". This is why the Synodal Path takes up pressing questions that are of great importance not only in Germany, but also in other regions of the Universal Church.

(3) We entrust our Synodal journey to God and ask for the gift of discernment of spirits to help us walk the path into the future.

1. Where we are:

in the middle of the crisis, in the middle of the world, in the middle of the Church

(4) "The Lord then said: What have you done! Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil! (Gen 4:10). With this question God also addresses us. Sexualised violence is a serious personal guilt; it is also systemically and structurally part of the Catholic Church. Those responsible for leadership have not acknowledged the failure for decades and have covered up cases of sexualised violence. Many parish and association members have also supported and protected the system. Today, this is still happening. Among us in the Synodal Assembly there are people who have silenced even the quietest and most timid attempts at lament and protest, and still try to do so today. Others have not believed those affected, thereby causing them additional

suffering and preventing them from receiving justice. Instead of taking the perspective of those affected and perceiving their suffering, some still rather lament the damage to the reputation of the Church and the heavy burdens on the church community. With the scientific MHG study, which researched sexual violence against minors by clergy in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference, many eyes and ears have opened - far too late and still associated with the inability of those responsible to admit own responsibility for the failure of the Church. The Synodal Path confronts this failure.

(5) However, we also see encouraging signs of hope in this grave crisis: the decisive commitment of those affected and of survivors to clarification, reappraisal and change testifies to a trust in the liberating God whom no power in the world can silence for good and who is also able to make His word effective anew in crisis situations of the Church through prophetic voices. Therefore, the voice of those affected is not only helpful advice in a helpless situation. In their voice we hear the admonishing voice of God on the way of our own evangelisation. Moreover, we become aware once again of many other problems which obscure the Good News in our Church and impair her mission in the secular environment: abuse in spiritual and pastoral relationships, the abuse of power through clericalism and incompetence, the disregard for women and for people who do not conform to the binary order of male and female, and last but not least, where the Church's teaching on sexuality promoted or promotes an understanding that does not do justice to what deeply constitutes the reality - especially the sexual identity - of many people. The four central themes and fields of action of the Synodal Path are dedicated to these urgent questions.

(6) As Synod members, we stand with our guilt and need, with our hope and our faith in the midst of a world that is itself shaken by serious crises. It is all the more important that the Church faces up to the questions of the time and that she does not give the impression of already having all the answers. Together with the people of today, she is in search of perspectives inspired by the faith in God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

(7) The personal as well as systemic dimensions of sexualised violence have drastically increased the loss of trust in the Church. And yet many people still expect something from this Church. They expect a community of believers who, in following Jesus, are committed to humanity; who turn especially to those who are distressed and in need; who, where necessary, lend them their voice and let them have their say; who build bridges between the many hostile camps and therein share their hope for a better future, who, strengthened by conversion and renewal, learn to proclaim anew the Word of God made man in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Synodal Path must also lead to a culture of conversation that is characterised by mutual respect and love of one's neighbour, because violence and abuse already begin with the language used. This means a resolute rejection of any kind of hateful and contemptuous communication. We are grateful for the many moments of intense dialogue, committed testimony and constructive controversy. However, we must acknowledge that there have also been painful moments when people inside and outside the Synodal Assembly have been hurt by statements and gestures of individual members. This challenges us to work resolutely towards a synodal culture that is based on respect. The aim of the synodal process is to achieve the greatest possible unanimity. This has been achieved in many places. But there is a minority that was not only sceptical about

the Synodal Path from the outset, but also voted against the large majority on important decisions. It is therefore important to remain in dialogue and to fill the decisions with life, which are to make synodality permanent.

(8) The Church is a Church with guilt and failure. She will only do justice to her mission if she engages with people and their everyday world and is particularly sensitive to the needs of those traumatised by violence and those of the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised. Pope Francis writes: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” (Evangelii Gaudium 49).

(9) We are a part of this Church because faith in God, hope in Jesus Christ and communion in Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist unite us with all believers in the Catholic Church, across all boundaries that separate people from one another. It is the task of the Church to be “a sacrament or a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (Lumen gentium 1). Therefore, she must take seriously Jesus' mandate to work for justice and peace (Matt. 5:6+9). Many things in society as well as in the Church are striving apart and have to be painstakingly brought together. Because the Church is not only holy, but also sinful, she must never carry out her tasks in an attitude of superiority, but always in humility.

(10) It is contrary to God's spirit to impose unity in an authoritarian way. The search for ways to prevent discrimination, suffering and violence in the Church in Germany - even against resistance from within and outside the Church - is not divisive but necessary. We rely on the encouragement of the Apostle Paul: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil”. (1 Thess. 5:19-22).

2. Where we come from:

with our experiences, with our disappointments, with our hopes

(11) In the Synodal Assembly we come together with different experiences, with disappointments and with great hopes. Many of us are young and know the arguments about the way of the Church in the last decades only from hearsay. They are committed to a non-discriminatory and humane Church. Others have been involved for a long time; they draw a mixed balance of what has succeeded and failed. Quite a few people have turned their backs on the Church because they have been disappointed or hurt by her or because they have no use for her any more. For them, the gap between their faith in the Gospel and the words and actions of the hierarchical Church has become too wide. However, it is important to include all perspectives, not to deny each other's faith and to always look for new ways to talk to each other.

(12) The Synodal Path would fall short of the claim of the Gospel if the expertise of those affected by sexual violence were not brought in and their voices were not listened to carefully in its midst. We are grateful that members of the Advisory Council of those affected by sexual violence at the German Bishops' Conference are involved and committed to the Synodal Path.

(13) Our self-understanding includes the experience of a democratic society in which human rights are valid. We expect that they are also respected and implemented in the Church. Our church experience is shaped by the Second Vatican Council, even if most of us have not experienced it ourselves. We want to be Church "today", with the energy of the Bible, with the staying power of tradition, but also in decisive contemporaneity here and now. Being united with the Pope and with the Church throughout the world opens up a richness of unity that consists in the vitality of a cohesion of very many people who bring their different gifts, their strengths and weaknesses into the community of faith. Unity is a dynamic quantity that cannot be lived at all without diversity. We share Pope Francis' concern that those in authority in the Church frequently act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators (*Evangelii gaudium* 47). God is close to everyone, inside and outside the Church. Spreading this message is the mission of the Church.

(14) The Catholic Church in Germany has followed a path of renewal that has led from the Second Vatican Council to the Würzburg Synod and the Dresden Pastoral Synod. Associations and initiatives have also initiated renewal processes. Different challenges have required different issues. Today, many problems remain unresolved and new ones have been added. Quite a few resolutions have still not been implemented. The proposals of that time cannot simply be repeated today because the situation has changed. The Synodal Path follows the tradition of the ways of renewal and synodal processes, which are also today taking place in many parts of the Catholic Church worldwide, in order to make the Church a place of faith and freedom for the people.

(15) Pope Francis stresses: "The present questions, as well as the answers we give, demand a long fermentation of life and the collaboration of a whole people for years." (Letter by Pope Francis to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany, here with reference to Yves Congar). The Catholic Church in Germany is on this path and continues to walk it. It is a path marked by great hope and joy, but also by deep disappointment because many had hoped for courageous steps of reform for decades which have not been realized yet. We therefore share the Pope's intention to go forth as a Church and to strengthen synodality (*Evangelii gaudium* 32) and we want to further develop the understanding of Synodality according to local conditions. We want to be able to proclaim the message of the Gospel in such a way that we do justice to the people in their respective life worlds. We share the conviction that the Catholic faith gives people the power to recognise the signs of the times, to interpret them in the light of the Gospel and to act accordingly.

(16) We are convinced that the crisis of the Church, which is evident in the crimes of sexualised violence and their cover-up, is not the end of the Church, despite the heavy guilt. Even in this deep crisis there is the chance of conversion and a new beginning. The Catholic Church has lost credibility in many areas, which she hopes to regain. This can only happen through a change which, in addition to a changed attitude, also takes institutional modifications into consideration. Much can be learned from the spirituality and experiences gathered in living congregations, religious orders and spiritual communities. Catholic organisations and associations provide important impulses and are a sign of hope within a space of the Church. The close relations with the Universal Church, which are not least deepened by the church relief agencies, are important as well.

3. Where we want to go:

to the lives of people, to the places of faith, to the points of rupture in society

(17) The goal of the Synodal Path is to prevent discrimination, suffering and violence, to eliminate the systemic causes of sexualised violence and in this way to listen anew to the Gospel of liberation. Only those who perceive God's voice in the cry of the poor for justice (Matt. 5:3-12) and in the silent groaning of the maltreated creature (Rom. 8:22) may dare to trust in God full of hope, despite all guilt, and stand up for their neighbours.

(18) "Man is the way for the Church" (Redemptor hominis 14). The Church must follow the path of the people and not judge and determine the ways of the people from a supposedly superior perspective. She is needed where fractures and wounds mark people's lives and must not hide her own fractures and wounds. She must be of service to the people.

(19) In order to do justice to what the MHG study analyses as systemic causes of sexual violence and how to deal with it, the German Bishops' Conference has asked the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) to jointly pursue a synodal path. It has proposed three topics for this: power and the separation of powers, the way of life of priests and the Church's sexual teachings. At the suggestion of the ZdK, the topic "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" was added. The consultation of the local churches at the worldwide synodal process of the Catholic Church has shown that the four topics are also significant in many other parts of the Universal Church and that they demand new answers.

(20) There are, of course, many more issues that need to be deliberated and decided in a synodal way in the Catholic Church. Each topic requires decisions that can be taken in Germany, with a specific responsibility of the bishops for their dioceses. However, all topics also raise questions that cannot be decided in Germany alone, because they concern the Catholic Church as a whole. Due to the worldwide situation of sexual abuse by members of the clergy, worldwide systemic changes are also needed. We would like to contribute to this with the Synodal Path in Germany. Clear votes are needed in this regard so that the Universal Church can hear our voice, the voice of the Catholic Church in Germany, just as we listen to the voices from the Universal Church in the Synodal Assembly. The critical accompaniment of the public is also important. We want to be part of a learning Church on a spiritual path that brings together all the faithful.

(21) We share Pope Francis' commitment to being a synodal Church. In a synodal Church, all are aware of their mission and have a say in setting the course for the future: In the "Letter to the Pilgrim People of God" he wrote: Synodality must begin "from below", always anew; only then is there that "synodality from above" which is a special leadership responsibility of the bishops. They bear this responsibility together with the whole people of God. In a synodal Church, all the faithful are called to listen together to God's Word and to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and to direct pastoral action accordingly. They are invited to perceive their mission and to have a say in setting the course for the future. In a synodal Church, ecclesial ministry is understood as a service to the priestly and prophetic people of God in the common struggle for the necessary unity and legitimate diversity. In a synodal Church, spiritual processes of reflection and discernment in the Holy Spirit lead to binding decisions.

(22) The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany is also a learning process of synodality. Synodality "is a constitutive element of the Church" (Pope Francis, Address at the ceremony

commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops). And at the same time, it is a “modus operandi”, a way of acting, that the Church must rediscover and practise in this time. On this path, not everything succeeds at once and immediately. An important task is therefore to stay on this path together. Simple forecasts for the Church will not help. We are talking about a future that is open to surprising turns and developments, full of trust in Jesus' promise that God's Spirit will guide His Church.