



## Orientation text

# On the path of conversion and renewal Theological foundations of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany

Decision of the Synodal Path adopted by the Synodal Assembly on February 3, 2022

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(1) The story of the liberation of God's people from Egyptian slavery begins with seeing and listening: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers" (Ex 3:7). God sees the need of the people and listens to remedy it - that is the Good News. Following this message today also begins with seeing the wounded and marginalised, with listening to those who have been silenced and condemned, to the members of God's people who have fallen silent and yet are rebelling. Pope Francis writes with regard to the poor: "They have much to teach us. (...) We are called (...) to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them".<sup>1</sup> They undoubtedly include the victims and survivors of sexualised and spiritual violence in the Church.

(2) Seeing need, listening to the Word of God and to one another is a fundamental implementation of all synodality. We need to seek, together, God's counsel for the Church and the world to be able to go the necessary steps. Dialogue is indispensable to a Church that is seeking the truth. As Pope Paul VI put it in his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* "For it becomes obvious in a dialogue that there are various ways of coming to the light of faith and it is possible to make them all converge on the same goal. (...) It will be a slow process of thought, but it will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others." (86). In dialogue, the participants are together in search of the truth, full of respect for each other and open to the insights of the participants. A dialogue thrives on different perceptions, assessments and points of view that are expressed. And it renounces them when, influenced by good arguments and new insights, they are no longer tenable. Dialogues usually lead to new, jointly-shared insights - even though they may reinforce what is tried-and-tested with fresh plausibility. But dialogues also teach us to live with what is foreign and incomprehensible and to endure a dissent that cannot be resolved (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes/GS* 43). Last but not least: Genuine dialogue does not stop at talking - it leads to decisions and to action that takes account of the new insights.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolisches Schreiben Evangelii gaudium über die Verkündigung des Evangeliums in der Welt von heute (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium on the Proclamation of the Gospel in today's world)* (24 November 2013), 198: Sekretaria.t der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Ed.): *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls* No. 194 (Bonn 2013), P. 142.

## I. Finding our way along the Synodal Path

(3) The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church of Germany which began on the first Sunday of Advent 2019 is a dialogue carried out in an attitude of faith, leading to listening and seeing, to judging and acting. It starts during a major crisis in the Church. It takes up the impulses of the MHG study. It lives from the perceptions, assessments and points of view of all members of the Synodal Assembly as well as of all people who participate in this dialogue. It must especially listen to the voice of those who are affected by abuse of power and sexualised violence. It needs a readiness to open up to new insights and to permit itself to be defined by them. It also lives from regularly seeking dialogue with new people and groups, within and outside the Church. The bishops are important participants in the discourse. They exercise the ministry of unity within their diverse local churches but they also constitute an essential link to the universal Church and to the Bishop of Rome. They must pay attention to what the people of God believe. This makes it all the more important that everyone on the Synodal Path has a say and can take part in decisions, not only those who hold a senior office in the Church.

(4) The Synodal Path needs a reliable orientation. In God's strength the Church knows herself to be challenged not to suppress systemic abuses of spiritual power, but to fight against them, and not to squander the resources of faith but to use them in a sustainable manner. Without God's help, the Church is lost. She must face up to her history and open up to the future. She needs new impulses to rediscover the Gospel. She needs new forces and alliances to help her draw practical conclusions.

(5) Listening together to the Word of God makes it possible to find answers to the pressing questions of our time, to pressing questions of faith and to pressing questions of the Church. Sexualised violence, sexual and spiritual abuse and the cover-up of it have happened in our Church and have systemic causes. Through her structure, her actions and her practices, the Church has caused great suffering.

(6) The search for orientation requires theological clarity. The task of theology is to open up the sources of faith from which motivations emerge for the conversion and renewal of the Church. "But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, "handing over" to them "the authority to teach in their own place." (Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*/DV 7 - with reference to Irenaeus, *Adv. Hær.* III,3, 1). Essential is the voice of the whole people of God; in particular there is an "option for the poor", which derives from the Gospel itself.<sup>2</sup>

(7) The task of the orientation text consists in clarifying the theological foundation for successful work in the Forums, and it serves the entire Synodal Path of evangelisation. The Forums deal with "Power and separation of powers", "Priestly existence", "Women in ministries and offices in the Church", as well as with "Life in succeeding relationships - living love in sexuality and partnership". The orientation text makes clear the foundations as regards the understanding of revelation, the Church's mission and the quality of theological debate so that these can be built on later.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Address to participants in the international Congress on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Puebla (3rd October 2019).

(8) The Synodal Path needs spiritual guidance as well as theological discussion. There is no Synodal Path without worship and prayer. There is also none without deliberation and decision-making. The arguments for and against must be exchanged fairly. In doing so, it corresponds not only to human rights, which must be upheld as a matter of course, but even more deeply to that "freedom in Christ" of which the Apostle Paul speaks so passionately (cf. Gal 5:1), that there must be no prohibitions on thought and speech, no fear of sanctions or discrimination. At the same time, however, this freedom also calls us to the common responsibility of the faith that has been handed down to us. Decisions must be well-founded. They must be followed by actions.

## **II. Rediscovering and reconnecting the places and times of theology**

(9) Theology is fed by sources of knowledge of revelation which are instrumental for the life of the whole Church. These sources are places of theology (*loci theologici*). These also include times of theology which always make it possible to discover the "today" of the voice of God in different contexts (cf. Ps 95,7; Hebr 3,7). It can be recognised at these places and in these times what God wishes to say to people by human means, and what people who believe hear as the Word of God. It is important to precisely define these places and times, to differentiate and determine their status, and to precisely clarify their interrelationships. They are found in the celebration of faith, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in serving one's neighbours in the midst of the world.

(10) The most important places of theology include Holy Scriptures and tradition, the signs of the time, and the sense of faith of the people of God, as well as the Magisterium and theology. No place can substitute the other places; they all need the mutual distinction and association. All these places need to be rediscovered and relinked in each time anew so that God's faithfulness to His promise has the power to renew the Church's faith from one generation to the next. Each of these places has a surplus of promise at each time which cannot be reduced by other places and other times, but which can be strengthened.

(11) The orientation text starts with "Scripture and tradition" in order to describe the basic, seminal testimonies of faith. It speaks of the "signs of the time", making it possible to recognise the "Kairos", the opportunity of the present, (cf. Luke 16:9), and of the "sense of faith of the people of God", which "cannot err in matters of belief" under the promise of the Spirit (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* 12). The orientation text places the "Magisterium" and "theology" in a mutual context in order to designate their different responsibilities and at the same time their joint mission, namely to serve the truth of faith which lies in God's salvific word.

(12) Discovering and linking the places and times of theology here and today is an expression of faith which unifies and liberates the entire Church in listening to the Word of God. This is the Biblical experience of God, rooted in the hope of Israel: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Ps 119:105).

## Opening up scripture and tradition

(13) The witness of Holy Scripture as the “highest guiding principle” (DV 21) and of living tradition are fundamental and landmark for the Church. For this reason, the Synodal Path takes its measures from them.

(14) Scripture and tradition are much more than standards to be observed; they enable a belief in God’s love for all His creatures. The Bible tells the story of how people discovered God’s love, justice and grace in the history of Israel, in the mission of Jesus, and on the paths of the young Church. Tradition makes it clear that God’s journey with people is continued in each generation because the people of God can trust in him “at all times” (Ps 62:9): He says “Yes” to all his “promises” (cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

(15) For the Catholic Church it is essential not to understand scripture and tradition as opposites but to communicate them together and be open to all the different voices speaking as human witnesses of the Word of God. On the one hand, Scripture itself is a tradition because it has been formed in the living tradition of the Church, which is rooted in Judaism. On the other hand, tradition only transmits the Word of God when it forms itself “in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). The meaning of Scripture reveals itself in tradition, and the meaning of tradition reveals itself in Scripture. It is therefore necessary to read and interpret the Holy Scripture in the light of tradition, and tradition in the light of the Holy Scripture. “This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything“ (DV 7).

*The Holy Scripture fundamentally testifies to the living God who creates, sustains and redeems people.*

(16) The Bible testifies to the “beginning” that God makes by saying His word again and again (cf. Heb 2:3). Therefore, it takes on a special significance with and towards the tradition as a fundamental witness to the Word of God. Greek Church Father Gregory of Nyssa describes the Holy Scripture as “a sure truth criterion for each teaching” (Contra eunomium 1:315). Read in the spirit of God, the Holy Scripture is the “guide” that lends orientation to the life and mission of the entire Church, also today and tomorrow (DV 21).

(17) The Holy Scripture is a source of renewal in faith, of criticism of wrongdoing, of encouragement to attain freedom, of a hope for redemption, of an invitation to love and of seeking justice. The Bible is inspired by God and written to give a voice to the poor, to comfort all who mourn, to free the captives and to make space for God’s grace - always “today” (cf. Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-19). The Bible stands for faith in God, love for one’s neighbours, and hope of renewal which imparts a foretaste of redemption.

(18) The Bible is however also a book that many people find difficult to access. It is written in the language of a bygone age. It reflects a worldview that has perished. It contains a wealth of scriptures whose significance and context trigger questions and attract criticism. It is misused again and again to exercise dominion over others. This makes good explanations all the more

important. Whoever believes never remains stuck to the letter of the Bible, but seeks to breathe the “Spirit” that “gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).

(19) The Holy Scripture fundamentally reveals how faith comes into being and reveals itself. The Christian Bible reaches from Creation to the end of the world. It starts with God, who speaks (Gen 1), and ends with a blessing for all (Rev 22:21). The rainbow becomes the sign of a Covenant which God establishes with all of humankind (cf. Gen 9:13). The Bible calls to mind the lasting mission of Israel, the flight from Egypt (Ex 12-15), God’s revelation at Sinai (Ex 19-40). It lends a voice to wisdom and prophecy. According to Luke, Mary testifies that God is on the side of the poor: “He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly” (Lk 1:52). According to the Gospel of John, God’s eternal Word became flesh in Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 1:14). The New Testament testifies to the memory of Jesus who in His birth, life and death, as well as in His resurrection reveals God’s unending nearness to people. (cf. Mk 1:15), His court ruling over sin (Mt 25), His search for those „who were lost” (cf. Lk 19:10) and His imparting life “more abundantly” (Jn 10:10). The New Testament shows the awakening of the young Church which will gather people for faith among all the peoples: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28). The Bible brings together all those who believe in Jesus Christ with their Jewish brothers and sisters in faith. It provides the sure foundation for the knowledge of the Living God (cf. Hos 6:6) and promotes friendship with Jesus (cf. Jn 15:12-17). It communicates the promise of Jesus Christ to remain on the path in the midst of His Church “until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

(20) The faith of the Church entails a conviction that the books of the Bible teach the “truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation” (DV 11). In this declaration, the Second Vatican Council invokes the New Testament: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

(21) The Bible reveals in a variety of ways the unity of faith without which there is no diversity, and the diversity of faith without which there is no unity (Rom 12:1-8). The Canon brings together a chorus of voices lending expression to the search for God in different languages, with different tones, and in far-reaching visions of the future, expressing joy in God and questions about God, but also doubt about God, struggling with God, and again and again astonishment about God. The multifaceted nature of the texts creates a vociferous choir singing the melody of the Gospel in all its highs and lows: with all the harmonies and dissonances which belong to people’s lives “through all eternity” (1 Chr 16:36), in the fundamental attitude of the God-given “hope of being restored to life by Him” (2 Macc 7:14).

(22) In the Bible, people, inspired by the Spirit of God, bear witness to God’s Word in human words. They heard it and wrote it down in their times and at their place in order to enable people in all times and in all places, who read, meditated and studied the Holy Scripture to hear God’s comforting, liberating word. Saint Augustine put it as follows: “God speaks through people in a human manner by speaking thus, by seeking us” (Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XVII 6:2). This suspense between God’s Word and human words ensures that the meaning of the Holy Scripture can never be exhausted, but has to be discovered anew and more deeply time and again.

(23) The Bible does not dictate world views, gender roles, values of the times in which they were valid. Rather, it also changes prevailing conventions in order to create space for God and open up spaces of freedom. But even in these processes of change, it is bound to a specific time. Therefore, the Bible has lost none of its topicality and relevance. However, its message must always be defended against attempts to use the Bible to set back, discriminate against and dominate people who, on the basis of their conscience, live and believe differently from the norms of the Church.

(24) Any reform of the Church worthy of its name is measured against the Holy Scripture. The Bible does not provide a pattern that one only needs to copy, but gives impulses and sets criteria when it comes to walking along new paths and mastering new challenges. The Holy Scripture is a compass enabling us to take new paths with God's help. It encourages us to engage in creativity and criticism, to discover the old and explore the new. As Pope John XXIII put it: "It is not the Gospel that changes, but we who begin to understand it better" (Apoftegma, 24 May 1963).

(25) The Bible must be interpreted in such a way that the salvific power of the Gospel can be proclaimed. This salvific power is faith (cf. Rom 1:16-17). The fact that interpretation is possible and necessary is based on the Bible itself: The Torah must be applied, wisdom lived, prophecy embraced. "Let the reader understand" (cf. Mk 13:14). The history of the Church is also a history of interpretation of Scripture which is to impart the literal, spiritual and historical with an up-to-date meaning. The goal of interpreting Scripture is to always hear God's voice and permit it to enter our hearts "today" (cf. Ps 95:7; Heb 3:7).

(26) Criteria are needed for interpreting the Bible. It is essential to pay attention to the original meanings of the texts, to the context of Scripture as a whole and to the connection with the tradition of the Church (cf. DV 12). Especially when it comes to the question of what orientation the Holy Scripture gives today, the interpretation must be open to new insights from the natural, human and social sciences. In addition, it must be remembered that new questions arise in every age to which there are no direct answers in the Bible. The task of the Church's interpretation of Scripture remains to make the Word of God audible in the many words of the Bible. Sacred Scripture opens itself to the witness of faith in the breadth of the Spirit who gives life (cf. 2 Cor 3:6).

(27) The interpretation of the Bible is a concern for all who read the Bible in order to discover God's story in the story of their own lives. It is a concern for the whole Church to find in the Bible the initial, fundamental witnesses of faith which must be proclaimed anew to every generation. It is a major task for the sermon, for catechesis, and for religious instruction, not only to inform people about the Bible, but to open it up for them for today as God's Word in human language. Interpretation is a matter for theology, the "soul" of which is the study of Holy Scripture (DV 24); as theology can provide a scholarly explanation of the Bible from the time of its genesis and it can recognise how it has been re-read and re-understood, again and again, as time has passed. The interpretation of the Bible is not lastly a matter for the Magisterium, which however must respect freedom of theological research and the sense of faith of the believers and put it to use. Its task after the Second Vatican Council is to explain the written Word of God that has been handed down "bindingly (authentically)", whereby it is "not above the Word of God", but "serves it" (DV 10). The Magisterium is the ecclesiastical authority to be heard and

obeyed in matters of faith and morals. Its task is to bear witness to the authoritative interpretation of Sacred Scripture (cf. DV 10) and to advocate that the "table of the Word" (DV 21) be richly laid for the faithful and that God's Word comes to the fore in the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, which is "near" to all those who believe (Deut 30:14 - Rom 10:8).

*Tradition testifies to the creativity of the Spirit of God, which leads the Church of all times and places on the path of conversion and renewal.*

(28) God's Spirit leads the Church on her path through time. This is how the tradition of the Church comes into being. It is not a rigid but a living entity. She hands down the Word of God which is fundamentally given to us in the Holy Scripture in such a way that the Word of God can be perceived in each time and in all places in the human witness to faith: in celebration, in teaching, and in the ministry of faith. Thus, tradition realises the unity of the Church, faith and baptism in the diversity of gifts and vocations (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:4-5). Tradition is founded in the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel. It requires constant transmission. According to Irenaeus of Lyons, the bishops, as successors of the apostles, have the task of reliably witnessing to the truth of the Gospel (cf. *Adversus haereses* 3:3). All who are in the ministry of preaching are called to recognise and witness to the liberating truth of the Gospel so that all members of the Church may grow in faith (cf. Eph 4:11-21).

(29) Traditionalism is wrong to only recognise the penultimate phase of church history as binding in most cases, thus curtailing the richness of tradition or forcing it into the corset of a system. But as a living entity, tradition develops in the changing times, in the diversity of cultures and in the community of believers who celebrate God's mystery, profess God's greatness and seek to know God's will. French author Madeleine Delbr el writes: "We are ready for every departure because our time has shaped us in this way, and because Christ must go with us at today's pace in order to remain in the midst of the people."<sup>3</sup>

(30) Reforms are an integral part of tradition: Worship changes; doctrine develops; Caritas unfolds. In its dynamism, tradition is the process to review the current form of the Church and of faith in order to always receive and shape her anew as God's gift. The tradition of the Church is open to the context of new discoveries, new insights, new experiences which challenge the traditional faith and demand new answers, which testify more deeply to the revealed truth of God, which serve the growth of the Church, the proclamation of the Gospel and the communion with all people to whom God's grace applies. The philosophy and wisdom of the peoples, science and the arts, the life of the people and the social work of the Church were and are inspiring factors for further development and for the ever-new unfolding of tradition. Prophetic voices are found not only within but also outside the Church. People's living conditions and attitudes change over time; these changes are shaped by tradition, and also help to shape tradition.

(31) In amongst the abundance of phenomena, in the contradictions of the times, and in the controversies regarding the right path, criteria are needed in order to recognise the tradition which is able to faithfully hand down and continually rediscover the Word of God. These criteria cannot be reduced to particular manifestations, rites or structures. Rather, it is God's Word

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<sup>3</sup> Madeleine Delbr el, *Frei f ur Gott* (Einsiedeln 1976), P. 71.

itself that constitutes the tradition. No human being may claim to possess this Word of God, but all the faithful are called upon to hear it and to bear witness to it (cf. Rom 10:17). It is crucial to promote love for God (cf. Dt 6:4-5), which is shown in love for the neighbour (cf. Mk 12:28-34). Wherever the "philanthropy" of God is shown in the lives of people (Tit 3:4), the tradition is alive.

(32) With regard to the Second Vatican Council, a distinction has to be made between tradition and the traditions which are very important and helpful in faith for people of a specific time and culture, but are not generally widespread, are not passed on from one generation to the next, but can certainly also be recognised as being narrow, as an exaggeration or fixation on a particular constellation. Tradition per se does not exist without traditions, but only within them; but a critique of tradition is required so that tradition per se can be recognised in traditions and from traditions. This forms part of the constant reorientation of the Church towards witnessing the Holy Scripture in light of the signs of the time.

(33) The subject of tradition is Christ Himself who brings together the people of God in His Spirit. Different members, charisms and gifts make up the people of God. The decisive factor is the community formed in faith, from generation to generation, and from place to place. Tradition is therefore inseparable from the sense of faith of the people of God (*sensus fidei fidelium*): The 'sense of faith' of God's people lends expression to Scripture and tradition: They are recognised and visualised. The sense of faith in turn extends the tradition of the Church in each present time by taking the witness for the Holy Scripture as a yardstick, and interpreting the signs of the time. The promise applies that God's Spirit holds and guides His people in and to the whole truth of the Gospel (cf. Jn 16:13).

(34) Distinguishing tradition in the multiplicity of human traditions is a task that is already set in the Bible in a different context (cf. Mk 7:8). The Holy Scriptures provide the criteria for evaluation because, read in God's Spirit, they reveal the Word of God in its original meaning, which must be determined anew in any given time. The signs of the times indicate the direction in which the tradition must be further developed. In their sense of faith, the people of God recognise by virtue of the Spirit where the paths of faith are running: what to preserve from the past and what to discard, what to develop further and what new things to integrate. Theology reflects what is, has been and may be considered tradition. The Magisterium has the task of continually opening up tradition as the source of a living faith, protecting it from misinterpretation and promoting the unity of the Church in critical phases through listening and discernment.

(35) The liberating power of the Gospel must be expressed in the interpretation of Scripture and tradition. For Scripture and tradition, by virtue of the Spirit of God, lead from the written word into the midst of life and from the past into the present and future. Scripture and tradition are decisive milestones for the path of conversion and renewal the Church is following. They open our eyes to all people who are searching for meaning and happiness, for comfort and strength, for solidarity and hope on the paths of their lives.



## Exploring the signs of the time and the sense of faith of the faithful

*The Church is instructed to interpret the signs of the times in her respective present as places of God's salvific and liberating presence.*

(36) The Church is tasked with giving witness to the truth of God. She can only do so if, in addition to Scripture and tradition, she also carefully examines and interprets the signs of the time for traces of God's salvific and liberating presence. For the signs of the time open up an important gateway to discover God in the people's history and present. This will enable the Church to adequately answer the pressing questions about the meaning of human life and redemption from evil for the present and for the future.

(37) The Second Vatican Council makes us discover that we have the task "of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4). In this context it is important "to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything [...], and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human." (GS 11). In this specific sense we understand the signs as a place of theology. They can be recognised through discernment in the midst of epochal changes in all areas of human life and in all parts of the world. The Second Vatican Council gives examples of the ambivalence of phenomena typical of the times: "Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance." (GS 4). Among the hopeful signs of the times - "authentic signs of God's presence and purpose" (GS 11) - Pope John XXIII counts, for example, the "improvement in the economic and social condition of working men"; the growing together of peoples into a "human family" that will soon know no more foreign domination; and, not least, the growing participation of "women in public life" (Pacem in terris 21-25; cf. 45-46.67.75). According to Pope John XXIII in these and similar signs of the time people discover "what is meant by truth, justice, charity and freedom. ... And that is not all. Inspired by such principles, they attain to a better knowledge of the true God—a personal God transcending human nature. They recognize that their relationship with God forms the very foundation of their life—the interior life of the spirit, and the life which they live in the society of their fellows." (Pacem in terris 25).

(38) The signs of the time stand for moments in which something significant reveals itself and forces one to make a decision. They stand for a window, a momentum, a Kairos. This places all of the signs of the present time on a Biblical foundation (cf. Lk 12:56): Time fulfils itself with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth: The "kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15). The life and destiny of Jesus are the incarnate signs of God's salvific and liberating nearness in the past, present and future of humankind. Such signs of the time must therefore never remain without consequences. Jesus Christ already calls to conversion and discipleship in the face of the fulfilled time. Today's signs of the time must therefore make us reflect; interrupt our habitual thinking and actions and make us consider new beginnings, also in the life of the Church.

(39) All signs of the time must be distinguished in the abundance of historical and societal phenomena and determined in terms of their significance for faith and the Church. Only in this way may orientation be gained for personal and societal life and for the life of the Church. For the "improvement in the economic and social condition of working men" or the participation of "women in public life", what is hopeful may be obvious. The crisis of growth, or the simultaneity of freedom and new forms of slavery, on the other hand, undoubtedly make the ambiguity of many signs of the time just as obvious. At the same time, they can point to both the salvific and to the unholy. The signs of the time must therefore be identified. What is the salvific element in which God's presence may be perceived? And what is the unholy element which must be overcome in the light of the Gospel, that is in the light of the salvific and liberating nearness of God and the call of Jesus Christ to conversion?

(40) This distinction is not new. The Scriptures of the Bible also call for the "discernment of spirits" (cf. 1 Cor 12:10), and warn against "false prophets" (1 Jn 4:1) leading people astray. The signs of the times must be interpreted in the spirit, life and destiny of Jesus Christ. The Risen One Himself sends the assistance of His Spirit to His disciples (cf. John 16:7-8). His spirit helps to distinguish and recognise the sinful from the righteous, the unholy from the holy, and the "authentic signs of God's presence and purpose" (GS 11).

(41) Recognising the signs of the time in the power of God's Spirit, and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, requires an interplay between all further places and sources of faith. The Holy Scripture opens up a view of criteria which result from the distinction between true and false prophecy. Tradition proves that the discernment of spirits has always been a task for all faithful and for the church office - under changing conditions, and with varying success. The interaction and expertise of all is needed: of those who have a special closeness to the everyday world of the people, as well as of those who are entrusted with the Magisterium, in order to ensure consistency and connectivity with the profession of faith. And theology ensures the connection to the insights that must flow into the interpretation of all the signs of the times in the discourse of the sciences, in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and in attention to the different cultural realities.

(42) The insights of other sciences are indispensable. For only they open up the reality of many areas of life that are not (fully) covered by Holy Scripture or tradition. The sciences decipher their inherent laws ("autonomy of earthly affairs": GS 36). Therefore "if methodical investigation (...) is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms" scientific knowledge "never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God." (GS 36). Therefore, dialogue with the sciences is essential for the interpretation of the signs of the times as well as for faith as a whole.

(43) The outcry of the victims of sexualised violence is truly a sign of the time. The outcry draws attention to a terrible evil - namely, decades of violence in which priests, religious and other employees abused their spiritual and administrative power over children and juveniles as well as over adults, and especially women. The outcry of the victims forces the Church into a salutary crisis of purification. It forces her as a whole to engage in conversion (cf. LG 9). Hearing this outcry and following it up through the renewal of the Church and its structures can itself become a sign of the times. It becomes a place to give witness to the Christian faith. The sign of the time making the outcry of the victims of sexualised violence effective is not inconsequential. It

brings into focus other questions of the life of the Church that in some cases have been open for a long time: the question of power and the desire for the separation of powers; the sustainability of priestly ways of life; the desire for equal access to the ministries and offices of the Church for all genders; the reception of current research findings in the sexual morality of the Church. They too could prove themselves to be signs of the times. They too call to be interpreted on the trail of God's presence and God's counsel. The following also applies to them: "Do not quench the Spirit! Do not despise prophetic utterances! Test everything; retain what is good." (1 Thess 5:19-21)

*In the intuition of their faith, the members of the Christian people of God assure themselves of the truth of the Gospel.*

(44) The call of the Apostle Paul not to quench the Spirit of God was first addressed to the Church in Thessalonica. As part of the canonical Scripture, it is handed down for the Church into the present day. It is therefore a reminder to all the people of God. The people of God, in all its members, is gathered into a community in order to discover the abiding presence of God in the manifold signs, and to explore His counsel: in the Scriptures of the Bible, in the traditions of the Church, and not least in the signs of the time. And it is in God's counsel itself that the whole people of God discover and explore Him. Only all the members of the Church together consolidate the intuition necessary for this. Only in this way does the sense of faith of the faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*) develop; only in this way does it become an open ear, a seeing eye or the sensitive touch of God. Mary, the Mother of the Lord, puts this sense of faith into words that come to life in the prayer of the Church: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour" (Lk 1:46-47).

(45) The sense of faith of the faithful is rooted in the common priesthood of all who are baptised and confirmed. The common priesthood fundamentally allows active participation in the three-fold ministry of Christ, the ministry of leading, the ministry of sanctifying, and the ministry of teaching (cf. LG 12 and 36). For the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the nature of the Church, this common priesthood has very far-reaching consequences for the teaching of the Church. The common priesthood means that the people of God in its entirety "cannot err (...) They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' [St Augustine] they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." (LG 12)

(46) The sense of faith of the faithful includes the connection between life and faith. It consists not only in what is transmitted by Church teaching. It is also far more than the intuitions of believers who are able to sense the truth of the Scriptures, tradition or the Church's teaching. The sense of faith of the faithful must also examine everything itself in the Spirit of God in order to find out what is good and right. The Spirit of God inwardly directs the faithful towards what determines everyone and everything: towards the spiritually-interwoven thread of personal conduct in life, the Church as God's community of discovery and exploration - in constant conversion, and on the path of discipleship of Jesus Christ. God thus communicates again and again in the sense of faith of the faithful. In this spiritual act, the faithful adopt the truth contained in Scripture, tradition or the signs of the time, out of an inner conviction. The role models are the

Saints, who themselves frequently struggled with their Church in their time, but in the midst of all adversities gave authentic witness to and inspired the faith of God's people, irrespective of their gender, of their origin, and of any office in the Church.

(47) The sacramental ministry of the ordained priesthood represents Christ as Head of the Church and ensures the unity of the Church - in all places and through all times. In this it serves the common priesthood of all who are baptised and confirmed. This ministry is indispensable. Unity of the Church does not mean uniformity. The unity of the Church consists in the unambiguousness of her mission and its many-voiced expressions. "The "visible and social union" of the Church (cf. LG 9) takes place as unity in the commonly shared faith, in the sacraments and in the communion of the Church under the successor of the Apostle Peter.

(48) This unity must be struggled for again and again. It is put to the test when there is long-lasting dissent within the people of God on central questions of faith. This becomes particularly evident when a church doctrine is not taken on board by a major section of the people of God despite many clarifications and explanations. Here too, the sense of faith of the faithful may emerge. Of course, ongoing dissent by no means automatically negates the truth of a theological insight or of a doctrine that is presented. But it does indicate that it must be examined, and if necessary further developed. It is the better arguments and more profound insights that count, and certainly not the number of loud voices or the forcefulness of power-conscious positions. Scripture and tradition never tell us about quick majority decisions, but they tell us a lot about the strenuous efforts of a common search for the truth. Decisions of faith in the Church should always be made according to the principle of unanimity. They aim at a consensus that is not an outward compromise but an inner coming together. The consequent involvement of the sense of faith of all the faithful in the other places and sources of faith prevents it being simply equated with a prevailing opinion in a present place. The sense of faith feeds on the sources of Scripture and tradition; it interprets the signs of the time, and is prepared to listen to the Magisterium. The Magisterium, in turn, presupposes and inspires the sense of faith of God's people. Theology encourages it through analysis and critical reflection.

(49) The sense of faith of the faithful expresses itself - guided by the Spirit of God - in particular in the "truth of conscience"<sup>4</sup>. Conscience confronts each person individually with God's direct call. He calls on him or her to unconditionally direct conduct in life towards the love of God, and of his or her neighbour. Love of God and of one's neighbour points to the conscientious insight of each one of the faithful into the common quest of all the faithful, indeed of all people of good will (cf. GS 16). No personal judgment of conscience could have permanence if it were to close itself to the pros and cons of common considerations with others. It must allow itself to be critically questioned in cases of doubt. It is quite possible that an idiosyncratically-accentuated decision of conscience could pass its acid test in this respect. It is no coincidence that the word conscience refers to knowing together, to *con-scientia*, to *syn-eidesis* (cf. 1 Cor 10:28). But in the end, it always appeals to the individual's own insight, to his or her own judgment, to his or her own decision. The deeply-personal, conscientious final decision about one's own way

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<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, Enzyklika *Dominum et vivificantem* über den Heiligen Geist im Leben der Kirche und der Welt (Encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World) (18 May 1986), 31: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Ed.): *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls* No. 71 (Bonn 1986), P. 30.

of life is binding - even if it should turn out that it was made in error. To ignore conscience, to control it from outside, to eliminate it, or even to neglect it, would be to negate the personal centre of people and their dignity that was created by God. Conscience, for its part, finds orientation in the light of faith.

(50) The truth of conscience is the realisation of the human being's rational nature and his participation "in the light of the divine mind" (GS 15). At the same time, the rational capacity for knowledge and judgement in many questions of faith and life unites believers with all other people: "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships." (GS 16). The conscience of the believers makes use of the findings of different sciences. But this also shows that the sense of faith does not establish an exclusive claim to ownership by individual believers. The sense of faith of the believers pushes for a consensus, for a commonly shared sense - even if such a consensus is not always reached and the community of believers then has to live with dissent over a period of time. The Church is not only a community of remembrance, but also a community of dialogue. She fundamentally involves all who are baptised and confirmed. The bishops in particular are responsible for ensuring that a dialogue may take place in alignment on the essentials, and does not end in a confusion of voices. As leaders of the local churches, they are advocates of unity, and bridge-builders within the world-spanning community of dialogue. They thus serve the "truth of conscience" - the formation of conscience in the community, as well as for each individual. These special advocates and bridge-builders can however never take their place.<sup>5</sup>

### **Taking the Magisterium and theology seriously**

(51) In common with the other witnessing instances of faith, the Magisterium and theology are dynamic variables. They are represented by people who are called in various ways to testify to and teach God's Word. The Magisterium and theology belong together from the beginning. For the Word of God is also the foundation of the magisterial proclamation. Theology is not only represented here by the scholarly discipline of that name, but ultimately by all those who are baptised who testify to their faith in various contexts, speak of their experiences with God, and pray to Him. The Magisterium and theology, like the entirety of the faithful, are bound to the revelation of the Word of God, to Sacred Scripture, tradition and the sense of faith of the whole people of God in the context of the signs of the times. The sense of faith of all the baptised, like all other places of faith, is grounded in the Holy Spirit. *Lumen gentium* 12 emphasises that the entirety of believers shares in the prophetic ministry and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and that they have an inerrant teaching authority under the guidance of the Magisterium.

(52) Tradition speaks with regard to the individual faithful of a *sentire cum ecclesiam*, of a feeling and breathing with the Church, to express that there is not only an outward, but also an inward relationship with the people of God. This connection can be perceived as a successful, joyful experience, or as a burdened, sorrowful one. Suffering under or in the Church is prevalent

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Pope Francis, *Nachsynodales Apostolisches Schreiben Amoris Laetitia über die Liebe in der Familie* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* on love in the family) (19 March 2016), 37: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Ed.): *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls* No. 204 (Bonn 2016), P. 30.

today in many, but especially among those who have fallen victim of abuse. This makes it difficult to live the joy of the Gospel and to experience the salvific dimension of the sacramentality of the Church. The Magisterium and theology need to take feeling with the Church and the *sensus fidei* seriously, given that any talk of a consensus in the Church would remain abstract without these two dimensions. Church educator Catherine of Siena showed with her letters to the Pope that the *sentire cum ecclesiam* also does not rule out constructive criticism of the conduct of the Magisterium.

*The most important task of the episcopal and Papal Magisterium is the authentic proclamation of God's Word.*

(53) In this ministry of proclamation, the ministry of leadership is grounded in the people of God. The ordained ministry is oriented towards and is meant to serve the common priesthood of all the baptised. The bishops have been understood as vicars and ambassadors of Christ (LG 27) since the Second Vatican Council; the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place among their principal duties (LG 25). They are in collegial communion with one another and with the people of God appointed to the ministry of sanctification, teaching and leadership.

(54) Universality and regionality make up the living diversity and unity of catholicity. The form of faith changes diachronically over the epochs, and synchronously distinguishes itself due to the different manifestations of the local church. A bishop, as representative of the faith of the apostles and at the same time of people within the respective local church, has to give voice to this faith in the universal community of bishops. The universal Magisterium of the Church is exercised not only by the Pope, but by the whole body of bishops, under his direction and in a collegial and conciliar manner. It is necessary to strengthen the synodal moment with the participation of all the faithful also in the development of church doctrine. Infallible decisions of the extraordinary Magisterium are subject to special conditions, and for good reasons form the absolute exception in the Catholic Church. The ordinary Magisterium of the Pope and the individual bishops may trust in the working of the Spirit of God. It is however not exempt from possible errors, unless everyone agrees in a consensus.

(55) These forms of the exercise of the Magisterium have been supplemented by the synodal tradition at universal Church and regional level since time immemorial, and Pope Francis has declared that he wishes to enhance this. An ancient principle of the Church goes as follows: "that which affects all as individuals must be approved by all" (CIC ca. 119, 3) There is therefore a need to consider how participation of all faithful in the realisation of their common priesthood in future councils and at universal synodal level can be guaranteed. Unity in the Catholic understanding is no static concept. It takes place in concrete terms between ourselves and the triune God, in the diversity of the people, local churches and cultures. Unity, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, is a characteristic of the Church and at the same time a task for all believers. We also notice this in the controversial debates within the Church, which show how lively and diverse the unity of the Church is. "It is not easy to grasp the truth that we have received from the Lord. And it is even more difficult to express it. So, we cannot claim that our way of understanding this truth authorizes us to exercise a strict supervision over others' lives. Here I would note that in the Church there legitimately coexist different ways of interpreting many aspects

of doctrine and Christian life; in their variety, they “help to express more clearly the immense riches of God’s word”.<sup>6</sup>

(56) The Magisterium is called to unlock the immense riches of God’s Word. In connection with the preservation of unity, the Magisterium is thus entrusted with the task of enabling and protecting the legitimate diversity of faith and doctrine that has always belonged to the life of the Church and to the working of the Spirit of God. The Magisterium had previously rather held back in theological disputes beyond conciliar decisions, and left the clarification of central questions to the theological debates that were shaped in the Middle Ages by the great traditions of the religious orders. The consequence of the First Vatican Council was that the Papal Magisterium, for apologetic reasons, increasingly claimed the task of and competence for theology for itself, and understood itself as a faith-defining defensive instance in the face of a modernity which it perceived as a threat to faith. In the anti-modernism controversy, this hindered the reception of knowledge from the humanities and the natural sciences and thus also prevented attempts by theology to open up new paths of faith in dialogue with contemporary thought and to make faith in God comprehensible to the people of their time.

(57) A new epoch started in the Church with the Second Vatican Council. The deliberations that took place at this Council led to a constructive dialogue within the Church and with the world, and to a new attitude towards other denominations and religions, as well as towards philosophy and atheism. The Papal Magisterium increasingly sought to establish a dialogue with theology and with the other sciences, the insights of which were now also positively received. This also led to a new flourishing of theology, the independence and specific Magisterium of which were acknowledged. The Second Vatican Council chose a clearly different language than the councils before: it no longer separates, excludes or pronounces condemnations; it sees the world in the love of God and grants the possibility of salvation to people outside the Church. These departures of the Council must be strengthened and advanced. Thus, with regard to its language, the Magisterium must also take into account today how its words affect people.

(58) The Popes and the Curia often reacted to reform-orientated synodal developments in the local churches with reserve or rejection, or did not even respond to pressing questions and urgent requests, such as the Würzburg Synod. This led to fresh disappointments and tensions. The Synodal Path notes that the Roman Magisterium also intervenes in our time in ongoing clarification processes and discussions, and insists on doctrinal positions that many faithful, including deacons, priests and bishops, far beyond Germany, no longer find comprehensible. The alienation between Church teaching and the increasingly complex lives of people, as identified by Pope Francis and the Family Synod, is also becoming a challenge to the practice of proclaiming the Gospel for the local churches in Germany. Particular significance attaches here to adherence to the meaning of the Scriptures, to the living tradition, to the signs of the time, to research into theology, and especially to the *sensus fidei*.

(59) The guidelines of church teaching are also to be critically reflected by theology. If the Magisterium points out that the Church does not have the authority to change a doctrine on

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolisches Schreiben Gaudete et exsultate über den Ruf zur Heiligkeit in der Welt von heute* (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* on the call to Holiness in today’s world) (19 March 2018), 43: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Ed.): *Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls* No. 213 (Bonn 2018), P. 26.

certain questions, then it must be examined what is at issue: In these cases, is it really a doctrinal position of the highest obligation? Or is it a doctrine that is to be located at the top of the hierarchy of truths? Is *ius divinum*, divine law, to be assumed? Can the justifications put forward be convincing? Every magisterial decision gains its authority only as an authentic form of proclamation of revealed truth. The insistence on authority alone is not enough. Because of the guilt of abuse and out of a pressing pastoral need, the Synodal Path is therefore looking for new perspectives. It should also be pointed out that even the authentic ordinary Magisterium can possibly err when it is in doubt whether it expresses the consensus of all in faith. This question is of particular importance because we are experiencing that worldwide, in concern for the future of the faith and the credibility of the Church, a not inconsiderable number of ecclesiastical doctrinal positions are being questioned. It is the task of theology to take up such questions and to support the Magisterium also through constructive criticism. It becomes evident anew how necessary dialogue is in order to find a consensus in our time. "Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church Herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. (GS 92).

*Theology is included in cooperation and dialogue between all places of faith.*

(60) Historicity and temporality also of the Church's doctrinal statements are to be taken into account. The Synodal Path therefore attempts to present theological arguments in a differentiated way. This is also to aid the Magisterium in examining previous statements in the light of scientific findings and reflections, whose inherent lawfulness is to be appreciated and examined and to realise necessary changes in teaching positions. This is at the same time a contribution to the discernment of spirits. Theology reflects faith in God in a plural way, and is tasked with permitting faith and rationality to come into their own as equals. In the same way as the Holy Scripture and tradition, theology as a science - in its exegetical, historical, systematic and practical manifestation - belongs to the witnessing instances and places of identification of the faith of the Church, along with the sense of faith of all the faithful and the Magisterium. It relies here on engaging in a dialogue with the other sciences, with which it seeks together to find the truth and its significance for people. There are different hermeneutical approaches in theology, and these themselves are open to the many schools of thought in an increasingly complex world, in order to be able to enter into a fruitful dialogue with them. Theology itself takes place in this rich plurality.

(61) "Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word." (DV 24). So just as the Church as a whole must reinterpret the text of the Holy Scripture again and again, because this text is not unambiguous, so too the soul of theology, that is the study of the Holy Scripture (DV 24), must lend a voice to the one truth founded in the mystery of God, equally in its diversity and multiplicity of meaning.



(62) In the dogmas of the Church, truths revealed by God are expressed in a historical and binding manner; they aim to illuminate and strengthen our faith. Nevertheless, they are also texts with multiple meanings, and in the course of history they have to be questioned again in terms of their meaning. Council texts are often compromise texts, given that they aim to achieve consensual unanimity. This is also taught by the Second Vatican Council, the reception of which is still underway in different and conflicting paths. Theology is aware of the tension of unity and diversity of such texts, of their binding nature, but also of their historicity and contextuality, which gives us food for thought. Pope Francis reminds us in this context that God has surprises in store for us again and again: There are no easy solutions when we ask in a differentiated manner for the meaning of God's Word for people in our time. "When somebody has an answer for every question, it is a sign that they are not on the right road. They may well be false prophets, who use religion for their own purposes, to promote their own psychological or intellectual theories. God infinitely transcends us; he is full of surprises. We are not the ones to determine when and how we will encounter him; the exact times and places of that encounter are not up to us. Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God's transcendence."<sup>7</sup>

(63) In common with the other sciences, theology must accept that each answer and every time gives rise to new questions, and that the search for the truth does not end, even if the truth has been found, until God brings time to an end. "At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully" (1 Cor 13:12). God's mystery is a lasting challenge for theology and for the Church as a whole. It leads to a properly understood self-critical attitude of humility in which one's own interpretations and convictions are placed into perspective again and again, i.e. they are referred back to the mystery of God's boundless love. Even if He is infinitely close to all people, He at the same time transcends all human thinking capacities. Theology is thus also tasked with countering fundamentalist temptations where positions of individuals or groups are to be made absolute and not subject to debate in such a way as to make it incapable of dialogue. A self-correction emerges in the scientific community of theology via the critical scholarly discourse. A critical counterpart is also needed in dialogue with the Magisterium, that is for both partners in the dialogue.

### **III. Deliberating and deciding in the power of the Spirit**

(64) Theological criteria have been identified in this text which guide the work of the Forums of the Synodal Path and the drafting of their resolutions. They aim to open up spaces for new paths, and show that there may be changes in the Church, indeed that there must be changes in times of crisis. How else could one speak of a serious conversion?

(65) The concept of transformation is of central significance not only in the celebration of baptism and the Eucharist. It is the guiding concept for Christian life: All are called by God to repent, to be constantly changed and transformed by His love. How does this happen? Is there really conversion and change or do the same familiar patterns, structures and attitudes remain?

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolischen Schreiben *Gaudete et exultate* über den Ruf zur Heiligkeit in der Welt von heute (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* on the call to Holiness in today's world) (19 March 2018), 41: loc.cit., P. 25.

Does the Synodal Path bring about change? If, in the face of guilt and sin, there is no repentance and new turning to the Lord, the Church becomes rigid; its members who are stuck in guilt betray the living God and the people who are seeking God today.

(66) The Church is a royal priesthood, a holy nation under God, so that they may announce the great acts of God in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Ex 19:3; 1 Peter 2:9). She is “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1). Because of her holy origin, from which she can constantly draw strength, the Church can be called holy in spite of all her shortcomings. She lives by the promise so that she cannot be destroyed by the forces of evil (cf. Mt 16:18-19).

(67) The profession of the holiness of the Church, which can only be founded in God alone, is connected with the admission of her sinfulness. The knowledge of the Church’s sinfulness must not be used in today’s crisis as an argument to simply carry on as before because sin and guilt have always been part of her. On the contrary: If the Church takes her own theology of repentance seriously, radical self-criticism, honest repentance, open confession of guilt and a genuine change of direction in her attitude, her actions and, where necessary, also in the change of structures are indispensable. Only in this way can a path of reconciliation which the Church hopes for and which only God in His mercy can open up for her be taken.

(68) Pope Francis paints a new picture of the Church today, which he sees as a “field hospital”<sup>8</sup>. The Church is to help heal the people’s wounds, and not to open up new ones. She should speak a language that people understand, which does not wound and discriminate, but allows people to recognise God’s kindness. Trusting in God’s mercy, the Church is called upon to confess her sins, to resolutely combat the structural causes of abuse within the Church and to courageously pursue new paths of the common mission. To respond to this call is the mandate of all members of the Church. This means that all those baptised shall assume their responsibility and use their right to give advice to each other and to take good decisions together.

(69) The model of a self-renewing synodal Church, which Pope Francis resolutely promotes, is also the model of the Synodal Assembly, which seeks to involve itself in the worldwide Synodal Path. This universal process deliberately embraces the participation of the common priesthood of all who are baptised. The question of the appropriate participation of the whole of God’s people in the deliberations and decisions in the Church arises worldwide, and demands new answers. Above all, the victims and survivors of abuse must be heard. Their experiences, their indignation, and their complaints, must find an echo in the teaching and in the practice of the Church. The experiences of people and the proclamation of God’s Word are already inseparable for the Holy Scriptures. No one may tear them apart.

(70) Due to the systemic increase of abuse within the Catholic Church the four themes of the synodal forums are indications of the first steps to be taken on the Church’s path of conversion and renewal. They are prerequisites for evangelisation that accompanies people’s lives, which is the mission of the Church, and draw consequences from the fact that the Church has to permit herself to be evangelised in order to bear credible witness to God’s Gospel. The theological clarifications needed to promote participation and the separation of powers, to shape priestly

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Nachsynodales Apostolisches Schreiben *Amoris laetitia* über die Liebe in der Familie (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* on love in the family) (19 March 2016), 291: loc.cit., P. 205.

life today, to strengthen women in ministries and offices in the Church, and to mediate between the sexual teaching of the Church and the lives of people today, are dealt with in the texts of the Forums, and lead to concrete options for action.

(71) The synodal experience “allows us to walk together not just in spite of our differences, but seeking the truth and taking on the richness of the polar tensions at stake.”<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis speaks of a diverse Church in which the image of unity is not a pyramid or a circle, but a solid polyhedron, i.e. a three-dimensional polygon. This is an exciting image that combines diversity and unity.

(72) Gathered and united by the Holy Spirit, the Synodal Assembly lives and experiences the rich diversity of the Church, united in the common faith. All members of the Synodal Assembly are called to pray to God, celebrate the liturgy together, and live the diaconal mission of the Church in service to all people. This unity does not rule out different positions also being taken up on certain questions of the Church’s life and doctrine in the future, and in mutual respect. Everyone involved in the Synodal Path will thus struggle for the path of the Church in the future, and will continue to seek a synodal understanding: The Synodal Path has not come to an end, but is to continue!

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Wage zu träumen (Let us dream)* (München 2020), P. 108.