



Foundational text

## Priestly existence today

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

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### 1. Guidance/Introduction

(1) The theology and everyday reality of the priestly ministry have been in a state of crisis for years, and this has implications for the whole life of the Church. Some of the questions being asked relating to the priestly existence have been under discussion for as many as 50 years, and have not been answered satisfactorily. Others have been newly added due to changing pastoral conditions and the shock over abuse by priests. The priestly ministry in all of its dimensions is being questioned in this context.

(2) There is no doubting the fact that there are many priests who exercise their ministry in a good and appropriate way and bear witness through an authentic celibate way of life. The changing pastoral conditions, however, and not least the many cases of sexualised violence perpetrated by clerics call for significant changes in view of the number of unreported cases<sup>1</sup> that can be assumed to exist. The increasing number of failings that have been uncovered in connection with cases of sexualised violence, and the dynamics of concealment that have been revealed in this process along with the loss of image of the Catholic Church is one of the main reasons for the alienation of many believers up to the departure from the Church, even of those who have been active church members so far.

(3) The call for substantial systemic change has become evident. However, there is a certain bewilderment with regard to the question of a viable vision for the future of the priestly ministry, which after all is a constituent element of the sacramental constitution of our Church and which has to be further developed theologically. From today's perspective, the theological reasoning often comes up against the limits of logic, whilst many questions reach a broad-based consensus:

(4) A priesthood that is theoretically reserved for heterosexual men alone seems questionable and not compatible with actual practice. The gender-dependent admission to the priesthood causes incomprehension, is discriminatory and must be abolished. The justification for celibacy as an obligatory priestly way of life is largely no longer accepted and convincing. The equal acceptance of homosexuality, also among priests, is explicitly demanded.

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<sup>1</sup> The study presented on 13 June 2022 referring to the diocese of Münster assumes that there are up to ten times more minors affected, and thus clearly goes far beyond the assumptions of the MHG Study. <https://www.uni-muenster.de/news/view.php?cmdid=12635>, most recently retrieved 16 June 2022.

(5) On the other hand, there is an increased tendency towards conservative status quo-ism, and even a rejection of change. Many priests are themselves ultimately asking the question as to the why and wherefore of their vocation and the specific tasks involved in the priestly ministry.

(6) A prolonged process of discernment, under the guidance of the universal Church, is evidently needed. The question of why the ordained priestly ministry is needed can only be answered in part at present and requires a differentiated answer which integrates new developments, experiences and insights.

(7) This question has been raised urgently for some time - not only in Germany, but worldwide. It can no longer be avoided. The basic text "Priestly Existence Today" sets out to find appropriate and sustainable answers in the face of the crisis, but without being able to give definitive answers.

(8) The following reflections do not only explore the status quo of the priestly ministry, but they embed it in the baptismal and confirmation vocation in the sense of the theology of the people of God, as formulated by the Second Vatican Council. The Biblical testimony is unequivocal in the thematic context. In the strict and proper sense, there is only one (high) priest, namely Jesus Christ. And the talk is of the royal priesthood and holy nation on which redemption has been conferred (cf. 1 Peter 2:9).

(9) It is therefore clear to what the official priesthood, as a priesthood of ministry, is orientated and assigned: to the Lord and to the people, on which the common priesthood has been conferred.

(10) Firstly, the priesthood testifies in a polar relationship to the abiding presence of Jesus. He is present in His Church, especially also in the sacraments, but in His sovereignty He is unavailable. The priesthood of ministry stands for the divine call to the congregation, and so stands opposite it in a certain way but together they bear witness as the people of God to the salvific presence of the Risen Lord in the world.

(11) On the other hand, it is the task of the priesthood of ministry to ensure that all members of the priestly people can develop their dignity, their gifts and charisms and thus, in following Jesus Christ, can contribute to the life of the congregation, i.e. its service of love, its proclamation and its liturgical action. The priesthood of ministry has a multifaceted and important mediating task here.

## **2. Church developments**

(12) Since the Second Vatican Council, the social and, in this context, also the ecclesial situation worldwide and in Germany has changed considerably, for which reference is often made to the political and cultural developments after 1968, after the events at the turn of 1989/90 ("fall of the Berlin Wall") as well as to 9/11 (2001). Many of these changes have had far-reaching effects on the life of religions in general as well as on the life of the Church and the faithful. First of all, some ecclesiastical developments are discussed, whose effects on the question of the priest's understanding of his role and ministry are to be discussed.

(13) The number of members of both the Catholic and the Protestant Church in Germany is declining sharply.<sup>2</sup> Whereas in the year of reunification there were still 28.3 million Catholic members, thirty years later in 2021 only 21.6 million are recorded, while Germany's population has risen from 79.75 million to 83.1 million in the same period; this means that from 35.5% of Germans before, only 26% are Catholic in the year 2021.<sup>3</sup> A major reason for the decline in the number of Catholics is the total of over 3 million people who have left the Church in the past 30 years.

(14) Add to this the demographic development (ageing of the population) and - though not only for this reason - declining baptism numbers: from almost 300,000 Catholic baptisms (1990) to 141,992 baptisms (2021). Is the Catholic Church on her way to becoming an irrelevant minority? For a similar development is shown by the decline from 114,000 Catholic marriages to 20,140 in the same period. Catholic burials show the same trend, albeit less drastic.<sup>4</sup> All this is likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic of recent years.

(15) Another indicator of the crisis in the Catholic Church is the average number of worshippers, which has fallen from 6.19 million in 1990, representing 21.9% of the membership, to 923,000 (4.3%).<sup>5</sup> This development is also massively reflected in the number of priests (religious and secular). In 1990, there were still almost 20,000 priests in Germany, but their number has fallen to 12,280 in 2021, which corresponds to a decline of about 40%. In addition, the number of priests from abroad working in Germany has risen steadily. In 2021 there were 2,279 priests, the majority from India and Poland. This represents an enrichment, but it also makes it necessary to reconcile different mentalities and ecclesiastical socialisations with each other. Even more obvious is the decline in the number of ordinations to the priesthood, which in 1990 was still 295 and in 2021 reached a low of 48 which corresponds to a decline of as much as 83%.<sup>6</sup>

(16) It is also worth mentioning the number of priests who have left the ministry for various reasons.<sup>7</sup> One of the main causes is that the priest in question does not feel able to live the promise of celibacy.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the accusation is repeatedly made that priests do not keep their promise of celibacy and that this leads to a loss of credibility in the exercise of the priesthood. Repeatedly, the problem of loneliness of priests is pointed out, which increases in old age.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The data are mainly taken from: "Katholische Kirche in Deutschland Zahlen und Fakten" (Arbeitshilfen, Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference, most recently Arbeitshilfe 325, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The increase in the number of Catholics with a migration background is interesting in this context.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas 288,945 of the 297,179 Catholics who died in 1990 were also buried as Catholics, the number of Catholic burials fell to 236,546 in 2020, whilst the number of Catholics who died rose slightly.

<sup>5</sup> The peak in the post-war period was reached in 1960 with 11.9 million churchgoers.

<sup>6</sup> The Church's 2021 statistics list 62 new ordinations for 2021: 48 secular priests and 14 priests in religious orders (German Conference of the Superiors of Religious Orders - not including from other provinces. See: [https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/presse\\_2022/2022-101a-Kirchenstatistik-2021\\_Flyer.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2022/2022-101a-Kirchenstatistik-2021_Flyer.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> According to the initiative called "Priester im Dialog" ("Priests in Dialogue"), the number of priests who have left the ministry since Vatican II because of compulsory celibacy is a good 1,500.

<sup>8</sup> The "Priests in Dialogue" initiative was launched in 2005 by dioceses that regularly invite their priests who have left the ministry, with the aim of overcoming disenfranchisement, preventing alienation, and exchanging ideas on how to improve relations with one another. The Pi Dialogue was held in Würzburg from 2005-2018. The Archdiocese of Munich adopted the Pi Dialogue in 2016, and was joined by the diocese of Augsburg in 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/ueberfordert-der-zoelibat-unsere-priester>; staff in the Recollectio House in Münsterschwarzach indicate a close link between loneliness and burn-out among priests.

(17) The figures for the other pastoral staff, on the other hand, are different.<sup>10</sup> Above all, the number of permanent deacons has increased by over a third. The number of lay people in pastoral ministry rose from around 5,200 in 1990 to 7,516 in 2021. However, in recent years this trend has also been reversed from growth to stagnation or decline.

(18) In youth work, which reaches a large number of children and young people in the areas of social commitment, altar servers and church music, especially in choirs,<sup>11</sup> it is to be feared that the consequences of the pandemic will make themselves felt, which could have an effect on the number of vocations in all church professions. For example, the number of students in all theological subjects in Germany is in extreme decline.

(19) Pastoral developments in the dioceses also have an impact on the question of priestly identity. The figures and trends have had a far-reaching, comprehensive impact on pastoral work and forms of organisation in pastoral work in the German dioceses in recent years, and have led to processes of change being initiated in pastoral care and congregational structure. Church buildings have been abandoned, sold or assigned to another purpose in numerous dioceses. A number of dioceses have plans to assess the church buildings in order to determine which ones should be retained in future. In addition, the number of legally constituted parishes is being drastically reduced in some cases. This has an impact on the self-image of many priests and the cooperation among all pastoral staff.

(20) In addition to this development, there have been extensive changes in the pastoral care field in almost all German dioceses which have led and are continuing to lead to parishes being merged to form pastoral care units or parish associations. A variety of leadership models are being proposed in this context, from a priest exercising leadership in the pastoral sphere with in some cases more than 20,000 congregation members<sup>12</sup>, so that one might speak of an “episcopalisation” of the priestly ministry, through leadership models consisting of several pastors according to the solidarity-based governance model “in solidum” to multi-professional teams. These new models of pastoral work, and also of leadership in large new units, pose major challenges to the leaders as well as to the teamwork skills of both the priests and all pastoral employees. New forms of voluntary leadership by lay people are being developed, thus creating a need for new job profiles to be developed. Many priests feel unable to cope with these changes, or do not recognise the motivations of their vocation in them. Conflicts also arise in connection with the priest’s ambition for power and his role in the Church. The question arises in this respect of the identity of the priest in this new phase of the development of the Church, irrespective of his ministry actually carried out. In this context, pastoral care must be given priority over administrative tasks.

(21) All reflections on the priestly existence and on collaboration between priests and pastoral workers must take account of these fundamental changes, and develop visions, prospects and most of all options for actions for pastoral care and for shaping the Church in the future. A reform aimed at providing for parishes to also be led by lay people was assessed as not possible

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<sup>10</sup> Permanent deacons, parish expert workers and pastoral assistants.

<sup>11</sup> There were about 360,000 altar servers in 2021, 660,000 members between the ages of 7 and 28 in the member associations of the Federation of German Catholic Youth, and about 66,000 young people are involved in some 3,630 choirs in the Catholic Church.

<sup>12</sup> Some newly-planned parishes are to include as many as up to 100,000 congregation members.

in July 2020 by an Instruction of the Vatican.<sup>13</sup> The traditional parish model of a parish led by a priest as a pastor will nevertheless have to be increasingly supplemented or replaced by new forms of leadership. The focus must always be on the fundamental service to God's people. In this respect, too, there is an urgent need for reform.

### 3. Change structures that promote abuse

#### 3.1. What the MHG study says: offender profiles

(22) The so-called MGH study published in 2018<sup>14</sup> on the “Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference,” revealed that it is not only transformation processes in society and the Church that make it necessary to fundamentally re-orientate the priesthood. The high number of priests who became offenders, and the systemic facilitation of acts of sexualised and other abuses of power that have been exposed, intensify the need for a re-examination. The data of the study shows a perpetrator quotient of 5.1% of priests working in diocesan ministry (roughly one in 20 priests), although the proportion is likely to be considerably higher in view of the high number of unreported cases, which must be assumed.<sup>15</sup> These are therefore by no means isolated cases, as is sometimes argued! Far too much harrowing suffering and life-long traumatisation of the victims of sexualised violence could have been prevented if consistent action had been taken in time. But even now, the forces of inertia within the church are immense, although the phenomenon of an irritated system has been evident since 2010. Yet it is clear: systemic changes are inevitable and require all hierarchical levels to take responsibility. In this context, it makes sense to first look at the typology of accused persons, also in order to counteract a general suspicion. Analogous to typologies of sexual abusers outside the church context, the study identifies three basic patterns of accused persons.

(23) “Accused persons who had committed sexual abuse on several persons affected under the age of 13, who committed such offences over a period of more than six months, and with regard to whom the first accusation was documented not long after their ordination, can be assigned to a “fixed type” in which there are indications of a possible paedophilic preference disorder

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<sup>13</sup> The text of the Instruction can be found at: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>.

<sup>14</sup> The Study, commissioned by the German Bishops’ Conference, is named after the research locations Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen.

<sup>15</sup> “The number of clerics accused - 38,156 sets of personnel records and reference files from the 27 dioceses dating from 1946 to 2014 were reviewed as part of the research project (SP6). Information regarding allegations of the sexual abuse of minors was found to exist with regard to 1,670 clerics of the Catholic Church. This represented 4.4 percent of all clerics from 1946 to 2014 whose personnel records and other documents were reviewed in the dioceses. This figure constitutes a conservative estimate, and findings from research into the unknown area suggest that the actual value is higher. The share among diocesan priests was 5.1 percent (1,429 accused persons). It was 2.1 percent (159 accused persons) among priests within religious orders who are governed by “Gestellungsverträge” (a contract conferring a form of stipend), and 1.0 percent (24 accused persons) among full-time deacons. Where the personnel records of clerics who were accused in the course of the application procedure for “benefits in recognition of the suffering imposed on the victims of sexual abuse” were reviewed, only 50 percent of the personnel records or other church documents relating to clerics with regard to whom the allegations had been classified by the Catholic Church in the applications as being plausible were found to contain a corresponding reference to the accusation or offence. This means that half of all cases would not have been discovered as part of a review of personnel records pure and simple, had the persons affected not actively applied for “benefits in recognition of the suffering imposed on the victims of sexual abuse”. This provides an indication of the extent of the unknown area that can be assumed to exist” [https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG Studie-Endbericht-Zusammenfassung.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG_Studie-Endbericht-Zusammenfassung.pdf).

in the sense of a primary or secondary paedophilic tendency. The life of a priest in the Catholic Church, with its extensive opportunities for contact with children and juveniles, is highly likely to attract this type of individual.

(24) A “**narcissistic-sociopathic type**” of accused person can be described as a second characteristic. Such a person exercises his power not only in the sexual abuse of children and juveniles, but also in an inappropriate manner in other settings. Sexual abuse manifests itself here as one among several forms of narcissistic abuse of power in such cases. (...) The power available to an ordained priest by virtue of his office offers many different opportunities to this type (...).

(25) A third group of accused persons can be described as a “**regressive-immature type**”, which refers to accused persons whose personal and sexual development is deficient. These include both heterosexual and homosexual accused persons. (...) The obligation to remain celibate could offer members of this type a misconceived possibility of not having to adequately confront the formation of their own sexual identity. (...).”<sup>16</sup>

(26) Conclusions about the changes needed in the selection, training and guidance of seminarians, as well as lifelong guidance for priests, can already be drawn after reading these offender descriptions. In doing so, the research consortium urges that one should not only aim “at the symptoms of an undesirable development, and thus prevent a debate taking place on the fundamental problem posed by clerical power (...)”<sup>17</sup>. The Synodal Assembly also confronts this analysis of structures which favour abuse with the text on priestly existence today.

### 3.2. Recommendations of the MHG Study with regard to the priestly existence today

(27) What is required is a mature personality that is also self-confident in the context of sexuality. In this context, a purely project-related examination of one's own sexuality is not sufficient.<sup>18</sup> A selection of candidates with appropriate use of established psychological methods as well as their accompaniment “with regard to the challenges of a celibate life, not necessarily chosen voluntarily, but obligatory as a prerequisite for priestly ordination is to be ensured.”<sup>19</sup> In-service psychological counselling for priests is to be made a permanent feature here, not only in the form of a pastoral-spiritual approach<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> MHG Study: Research project, Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference, p. 12, source (in German): [www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf](http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf), most recently retrieved 8 January 2022. Emphasis by the authors “What is more, the inability of individuals of this type to enter into a mature partnership does not need to be socially justified if they become priests. The first accusation often does not occur in this group until after a prolonged period of latency that occurs subsequent to being ordained as a priest. One reason for this might be that the barrier to sexual abuse offences is not broken down until overburdening, isolation and a lack of support from the Church with regard to such problems have increased over time.” (ibid.)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> “Celibacy is not an eo ipso risk factor for sexual abuse. A commitment to a life of celibacy however requires an intensive examination of one's own emotionality, eroticism and sexuality. A predominantly theological and pastoral approach towards these developmental requirements is not sufficient.” (Ibid., p. 17)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ibid.

(28) The Synodal Assembly therefore sees both the need to discuss the appropriate rationale and necessary changes regarding mandatory celibacy, as well as to reflect on improved professionalism and personal development, which includes the further development and evaluation of training and continuing education, and to adopt appropriate recommendations for action.<sup>21</sup>

(29) The present priestly formation must be put to the test under these aspects. In view of the decreasing number of candidates, comprehensive training in separate, closed institutes seems increasingly questionable, but joint training of all pastoral professional groups seems more sensible and necessary - also with regard to professional standards and the avoidance of misogynistic tendencies as well as the prospect of interprofessional cooperation in the future pastoral (large) spaces.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the admission of women for ordination is also often seen as beneficial.<sup>23</sup> The training for the priesthood to date should be put to the test with regard to these aspects.

(30) Many of the needs for change that have been highlighted stem from a lack of standards for professionalisation and professionalism. Developing appropriate standards, enabling a feedback culture, and if necessary establishing sanction measures, are the tasks that are introduced in the implementation text entitled "Professionalisation and personality development". Such a feedback culture is intended not only to enable unilateral feedback, but by using reflection and regulation to make sure that proximity and distance of priests to members of the congregation, families, and especially children and young people in basic and further training, accompanied by trained experts and other assistance from the Vicariates General/ordinariates, are appropriately shaped, and assume binding legal force.

(31) Large numbers of offences committed by the third group of offenders did not begin until after an average period of service of approx. 8-14 years. The assumption that this has to do with overburdening and loneliness after a certain period of service has implications for the standards that need to be developed with regard to professionalisation. Considerations with regard to way of life are addressed in the implementation text on celibacy to some extent. This also needs to be considered when revising the "ratio nationalis" (the nationwide framework statutes for training for the priesthood), which has already been drawn up by a working group of the German Bishops' Conference. The implementation of these statutes should be based on broad expertise. The issue of homosexuality among priests and candidates for ordination must not be ignored.<sup>24</sup> Special needs are also seen with regard to the Sacrament of Penance. While the Sacrament of Penance offers the opportunity to experience the heart of faith as a place of God's love and readiness to forgive, a double sensitisation is advisable nevertheless: Firstly, the possibility of abuse, including of a spiritual and intellectual nature, to which the Sacrament of Penance is particularly susceptible, needs to be addressed in formation and professional accompaniment. Furthermore, increased sensitisation is required with regard to possible insinuations and naming

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Implementation text "The celibacy of priests - strengthening and opening".

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Implementation text entitled "Celibacy of priests - encouragement and opening".

<sup>23</sup> The Synodal Forum "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" has developed some points on this question. From the forum "Priestly existence today" there is the implementation text "Plural ministry structure as an opportunity - overcoming clericalism", which also touches on this question from another perspective.

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, reference is made to the implementations texts "A re-evaluation of homosexuality in the Magisterium" and "Breaking with taboos and normalisation - Votes on the situation of non-heterosexual priests."

of those affected in confession. The same applies to confidential conversations in any spiritual accompaniment.

(32) On the other hand, confession has been used by perpetrators of sexual abuse as a way of disclosing acts in a way that avoids further prosecution.<sup>25</sup> There is a need for increased awareness and training for confessors on how to proceed in such cases; if necessary, new regulations under church law (prohibition of absolution, etc.) must be adopted.

(33) All this shows that beyond the "clarification, processing and prevention of individual acts of sexual abuse", a fundamental examination of the ordained ministry of the priest and his understanding of his role vis-à-vis non-ordained persons is necessary<sup>26</sup>. It is therefore a matter of sometimes profound and sometimes painful changes in the priestly self-understanding and in the image of the priest of many believers, as they are addressed in the following text (especially in chapter 5).

### 3.3. Overcoming clericalism! Topics and cross-references to other Forum topics

(34) Not only the MHG Study, but also other diocesan studies, and the inclusion of the victims in the process of analysis, are pushing for a renewed examination of the Church's understanding of ministry. The misconception of priestly ordination, which can be summarised under the keyword clericalism, is to be considered in this context above all other things. Pope Francis confronts this with a reinforced approach to Synodality<sup>27</sup>. The under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Nathalie Becquart, clarifies this idea by stating that "the vision of a synodal Church is a means to overcome clericalism and get rid of it (...)"<sup>28</sup>. There seems to be a consensus in the universal Church that clericalism runs counter to the fundamental understanding of the priestly ministry, and that changes are necessary. The "internally-blind regime of monopolised male celibate sacral power",<sup>29</sup> as Gregor Hoff puts it, needs to be overcome.

(35) This has implications among other things for the theology of the "repraesentatio Christi" (see Chapter 5).

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<sup>25</sup> "Accused clerics not infrequently see confession as an opportunity to reveal their own abuse crimes. The protected sphere of the confessional box was even used by accused clerics to prepare or conceal offences in some cases. The Sacrament of Confession is therefore particularly significant in this context. From a scientific point of view, the responsibility of the confessor for adequate clarification, confrontation and prevention of individual acts of sexual abuse should be emphasised." <https://www.dbk.de/themen/sexualisierte-gewalt-und-praevention/forschung-und-aufarbeitung/studien/mhg-studie>, Research project, Overall final report. p. 17. Most recently retrieved 25 April 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.* "A change in clerical power structures requires a fundamental discussion of the ordained ministry of the priest and his understanding of his role vis-à-vis non-ordained persons. This must not remain lip service by those responsible for the Church. The sanctioning of individual accused persons, public regret, financial payments to those affected and the establishment of prevention concepts and a culture of respectful interaction are necessary, but by no means sufficient measures. If the reactions of the Catholic Church are limited to such measures, such fundamentally positive approaches are even likely to maintain clerical power structures, as they only target symptoms of an aberrant development and thus prevent the fundamental problem of clerical power from being addressed." (p.18).

<sup>27</sup> As he emphasised back in 2015: "What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word "synod". Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice." [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html), most recently retrieved 25 April 22.

<sup>28</sup> Lebendige Seelsorge: Klerikalismus. Vol 1/2022, Echter-Verlag Würzburg, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* P. 39.



(36) As far as the issue of improperly-exercised power is concerned, cross-references need to be made to Synodal Forum I. Synodal Forum III discusses the potential to rectify the power imbalance and the male-oriented structures by opening up ordination admission and increased involvement in leadership functions not only for men. The “repraesentatio Christi” with regard to gender affiliation is also discussed here. The topic of sexuality is not only addressed in Synodal Forum IV, but also has a direct impact on the reflections of the Synodal Forum “Priestly existence today”. Confronting one’s own sexuality, and the topics related to eroticism and emotionality, is increasingly being set as a topic in training and in occupational standards. This seems to become particularly necessary irrespective of the request to lift the general obligation of celibacy.

(37) As the ongoing discussions on the basis of the abovementioned studies reveal, protecting the offenders has too often been prioritised over protecting victims of sexualised violence. This does not only refer to the priestly ministry, but also to the understanding of ministry and the exercise of the episcopal ministry. This must be considered elsewhere and the necessary consequences have to be drawn. It is important to develop an awareness of the problem where insufficient measures of sanctioning and prevention tend to help preserve clerical power structures if they merely target the symptoms of an undesirable development.<sup>30</sup> The implementation text entitled “Prevention of sexualized violence and dealing with perpetrators in the Catholic Church” also takes a look at concrete measures to this end.

(38) The very nature of the professional groups of parish and pastoral assistants who have received theological training and are active in pastoral care, as well as other professions which are in the process of developing and which exist in the German-speaking world, also invites reflection in pastoral practice and in theology on the understanding of pastoral care and of the ministry. The implementation text entitled “Opportunities through a plural ministry structure - Overcoming clericalism” suggests such a reflection.

#### **4. The purpose and the goal of the sacramental ordained ministry**

(39) The various demands on the Church and the forthcoming processes of change also confront the Synodal Assembly with the fundamental question of whether and for what purpose the priestly ministry is needed. This question also seems urgent, since many congregations have to organise their lives without an ordained priest due to the shortage of priests. In this context, it must be guaranteed that there are no clerical misinterpretations, as if there were the privilege of a higher Christianity of the ordained.

(40) The sacramental necessity of the priesthood is being questioned. In many parishes the specific ministry of the priest is no longer plausible. For in view of the existing shortage of priests, many parishes are finding quite pragmatic ways of organising church life without a priest. Many of the arguments for the tasks reserved for the ordained priest are no longer convincing. The traditional priestly ideal has not only been deeply damaged by the abuse crisis. Due to a theological and ecclesiastical adaptation that has long been refused or delayed, and

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. MHG Study: Research project, Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference, pp. 15-19, source: [www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf](http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf).

not least because of many status relics that are by no means part of the ministry, it seems in many respects to have fallen out of time. All this needs to be perceived objectively. A conscious re-accentuation on the basis of the biblical and theological sources and the ecclesial tradition is therefore necessary in order to find credible and sustainable answers to these problems in the present. In this process, the question of the necessity of the priestly ministry can also unfold salutary-critical or de-clericalising dynamics in these search movements, which deserve appreciation and acceptance. This fundamental question must be addressed in a credible way, among other things with regard to changed admission conditions and the opening of ordination to all genders.

(41) According to Catholic tradition, the ordained minister constitutively keeps present in the church the essential counterpart of the divine promise and claim in the congregation.

(42) The Catholic tradition is currently faced with the task of revising the theology of ministry in such a way that the counterpart of Jesus' saving action (*triplex munus christi* = teaching, guiding, sanctifying) is credibly implemented in the actions of ordained priests.

(43) The priesthood has the special responsibility and mission to realise the sacramentality of the Church in and with the people of God. The sacramentality of the Church is manifested by being a sign and instrument of God's salvific nearness to all people and of the unity of all people (LG 1).

(44) The priesthood has special responsibility for the sacraments. To this end, priests step back as persons and in their actions give space to the work and presence of Jesus Christ and his message of God's love for every human being.

(45) They invite and preside at the communion of the Eucharist on behalf of Jesus Christ. They open spaces of reconciliation and unity, especially symbolic in the sacrament of reconciliation. Through their devotion they allow people to experience God's healing devotion to all people, especially to the poor and suffering, as in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Their ministry aims to ensure that all the baptised and confirmed live out their common priesthood, in the celebration of the sacraments and in their whole lives.

(46) Such a ministry is indispensable for the sacramentality of the Church.

(47) In order for the priesthood to be a sign and instrument of God's salvific nearness and the unity of people, it must be freed from everything that stands in the way of this: from separation from people's lives, from an idealisation of the minister, from privileges of status and exaltation. For if the official role and the person are not thought to be congruent, the priestly ministry becomes liveable and does not fail because of the excessive demands of (self-)imposed perfection.

(48) The priesthood can be understood as a sign when its members and their actions credibly point to the work of Jesus Christ. This succeeds when they do not focus on themselves but on God's action in the church community. And it succeeds when it is noticeable that they strive to live as followers of Jesus Christ and His message.

(49) It can be an effective tool when the healing and unifying closeness and love of God can be experienced in the actions of the ministers. This succeeds when they bring people together,

proclaim the Gospel and are close to people in their joys and hopes, sorrows and fears, especially to the poor and disadvantaged.

(50) “Whilst the Church, understood in the sacramental sense, is not an end in herself this also applies to the sacramental office. This office is responsible not for human rule becoming effective in salvific terms, but the life-giving power of God. (Foundational text “Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission”) Power exercised by priests for and on behalf of God’s people must be exercised in the spirit of Jesus: Empowering the weak and acting in a participative, communicative and transparent way without putting oneself first. This is a consequence of Jesus’ mission: “But it shall not be so among you”, as in the case of those in power who abuse their power (cf. Mk 10:43-44).

(51) “The church ministry is a sacramental sign which points to Christ and receives its authority from Him. This does not absolve the minister from supervision and criticism. In fact, quite the reverse: The sacramental office does not establish privileges, but is a call to render service. Precisely because it not only organises a function, but is based on an empowerment and makes it possible to represent Christ, the Head of the Church, the sacrament of the ordo always calls to mind the difference between Christ and the minister”. (Foundational text “Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission”)

(52) The biblical statements on the priesthood are somewhat cult-critical in their orientation, and thus always priest-critical. The First Testament is reserved vis-à-vis the hereditary priesthood, since this priesthood is always in danger of turning its “ministry” into an instrument of domination. The Second Testament radicalises this critical view of the priesthood. For Christians, there is no priest but Jesus: “There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim 2:5, cf. also Hebr). There is hence only one priest in the Church, the Lord Himself. Any priesthood can only be accepted if it points directly and existentially to the mission of Jesus and makes His presence felt.

(53) The Church needs priests because she lives from the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the celebration of which is presided over by a priest. The priest is ordained (“consecrated”) so that he as a person stands for Jesus Christ himself presiding over the celebration of the sacraments. His ministry aims to ensure that all the baptised and confirmed live out their common priesthood, in the celebration of the Eucharist and in all their lives. The ordained priest, within the framework of his specific tasks as a minister, stands for the legitimate making present of the action of the risen Christ.

(54) The actions of the priest can only be understood if they personally stand up for the holiness and radical otherness of the divine claim. The why and the wherefore of the ordained priestly ministry will only be understandable today if the minister’s serving pro-existence effectively liberates people, and the liberated individual may perceive in it a sense of God’s holiness. The Church requires priests in order for this message to be proclaimed.

## 5. Theological reflections on the priestly ministry

(55) All the considerations so far show that there is a need today for a renewed pastoral implementation of the sacramental priesthood, and this begins with an honest assessment<sup>31</sup> and locates its theological foundations in it. As Pope Francis stresses in his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, we are “living in times of change” which raise “new and old issues, in view of which a discussion is justified and necessary”.<sup>32</sup>

### 5.1. The priestly ministry in the people of God

(56) In his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, Pope Francis desires a “pastoral conversion”,<sup>33</sup> which is measured by the primacy of evangelisation, as the Church is to be a “sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1), and to share “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” with all (GS 1). In synodal terms, this can only be realised as the path of the whole people of God.<sup>34</sup> It is from this vocation of God’s people alone that reflection on the ministry of the priest is possible. For the priest comes out of the people of God, and his ministry is always to be understood in terms of this setting.

(57) 1 Peter and other New Testament Scriptures already speak of the common dignity and the unity of all in the one people of God. The Biblical theology of baptism includes the awareness of all who are baptised being anointed by the Spirit (1 John 2:20) and forming a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). Hebrews in particular develops an awareness that there is only one priest, namely Christ himself, through whom all who are baptised gain access to the Father. He brings salvation, and there can be no other mediator. His giving His life makes all sacrifices complete, so that nothing must be added to His sacrifices, except that the faithful follow His gift and so give the praise due to the Father. Therein lies the priestly dignity of all who are baptised. By being anointed with chrism in baptism, the newly-baptised are assured of being members of God’s people and of sharing in the priestly, royal and prophetic ministry of Christ. The common baptism is the bond that brings everyone together and unites them in the one people of God. This pneumatological origin of the people of God is confirmed and always recalled by the priest.<sup>35</sup> Even before the New Testament speaks about different services and offices, baptism and anointing with the Spirit form the sacramental foundation of churchhood. Each and every baptised person represents Christ and the Church.

(58) The different representations of the Church already convey in the New Testament the perspective of serving. There are images that express in strong words the nearness between Christ

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Baumann, Klaus et al. (eds.), *Zwischen Spirit und Stress. Die Seelsorgenden in den deutschen Diözesen*, Würzburg 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany. VAS 220 (29 June 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No.6.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in: VAS 194 (24 November 2013), No. 111: “Evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary.”

<sup>35</sup> PO 11.

and His Church, for example in the reflection on the Church as the body of Christ (e.g. Eph 4:12), whilst others consider the juxtaposition of Christ and the Church, such as when Christ is seen as the Bridegroom of the Church (cf. Eph 5:21-33) - an image for His covenant of loyalty, which, by the way, must not be misinterpreted in a gender-specific way. This is insofar significant, as the Church must not equate herself with Christ. The ordained minister performs a service to the community as a member of the people of God. He is to perform his service in a community-building, motivating way for others, not in competition with the other baptised individuals. His service largely consists of promoting and affirming the revealed being of the Church and the ecclesial action of all the baptised.

(59) The Biblical archetype of service is the washing of the feet, which Jesus concludes with the instruction: "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:1-17). Historically, a one-sided view has emerged. The ordained became clerics: from around the 3rd century onwards, they were understood to have their own ecclesiastical sociological status (*ordo*), which was distinguished from the status of the "laity". This difference in status, with which different rights and duties are associated, still shapes church law and liturgy today. However, this is not biblical. Clericalism is rooted in the emphasis on this difference of status.

(60) Sacramental ordination has nothing to do with sacralising the person. By no means does the ordained priest become an image of Christ in all aspects of life. Nor is it an enhancement of the common priesthood of all the baptised (*sacerdotium commune*), but rather an authorisation of the ordained to act in *persona Christi capitis* for the benefit of the faithful in certain, narrowly defined sacramental acts (*Presbyterium Ordinis* no. 2). It is no coincidence that the Decree on Priests of Vatican Council II consistently does not use the term priest ("*sacerdos*") for the minister, but "presbyter" (elder, authorized). They are distinguished from the bearers of the common priesthood, the faithful, by their office and role, not by a priesthood, however enhanced.

(61) The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*" of the Second Vatican Council attempts to eliminate potential, i.e. historically-conditioned, flaws. The concept of the Church as a hierarchically-ordered "*societas perfecta*", that is as a society of unequals, can still be found in the draft versions.<sup>36</sup> *Lumen gentium* itself then prefers the ecclesiology of the people of God such that the unity of the people of God precedes the hierarchical order of the Church. The equality of the dignity of the baptised goes first, and conditions the diversity that we find. The priesthood of the ministry is preceded by the common priesthood of all the faithful, which expresses itself in prophesy, leadership and witness. Thus, the Council has laid the foundation for embedding the ministry of the priest in the many ministries and spiritual gifts in the Church.

(62) The texts of the Council remain authoritative for today's reflection on the people of God and the priestly ministry. The German bishops considered and developed concrete consequences in their statement on the renewal of the pastoral ministry "*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*" of 1 August 2015.<sup>37</sup> Esteem for the gifts of the Spirit and the recognition that all are called through baptism

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Wenzel, Knut, *Kleine Geschichte des II. Vatikanischen Konzils*, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 2005, 61-66.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher), *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*. Statement by the German bishops on the renewal of the pastoral ministry, in: *Die deutschen Bischöfe* 100, Bonn 2015.

to live a holy life and to contribute their own gifts to the Church is significant here.<sup>38</sup> The charisms of all who are baptised are emphasised as the richness of the Church. The text recalls the priestly dignity of those who are baptised, which cannot be enhanced. Ordained priests are to be instruments, but are not to form an estate of their own.<sup>39</sup>

(63) These texts also constitute an important foundation for the further work of the Synodal Path. The reception of the Second Vatican Council is not complete with regard to the question of the essence of the priesthood. What is more, priests' self-perception and the perception of others do not always coincide. This may lead to (personal) crises of identity for priests and to confusion among the remaining faithful. It is then tempting to seek clarity through demarcation. Priests do not gain authority in the sense of *auctoritas* over the people of God by these means; at most they can rely on *potestas*. This touches on the issue of power.<sup>40</sup>

## 5.2. The common representation of Christ by the baptised and the representation of Christ by the priest

(64) Each and every baptised person represents Christ, the only "high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (Hebr 5:10), who has made His Church into a kingdom of "priests for his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6). "The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly".<sup>41</sup> The representation of Christ by the priest in the administration of the sacraments reserved for him is distinct from this, especially the celebration of the Eucharist. It is clear in Magisterial texts that the "repraesentatio Christi" by the priest is not limited solely to the sacramental celebration of or presiding over the Eucharist, but concerns the entire priestly existence.<sup>42</sup> This opens up the question of the relationship between the representation of Christ by the priest outside the Eucharist, and similarly the representation of Christ by all faithful.

(65) The priestly existence is not different from that of all faithful outside his sacramental acts. The fact that the "sacramental representatio" of the priest shapes his whole life does not mean that he is different in everyday life. The opposite is the case: His sacramental ministry, which is characterised as receding behind Christ, will also shape his behaviour in everyday life.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No. 9: "The anointing of the Holy which was poured out on the whole body of the Church "distributes special graces among the faithful of every state and condition of life, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (1 Cor 12:11). Through these he makes them suitable and ready to undertake various works and ministries for the renewal and full construction of the Church, according to the word: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit" (1 Cor 12:7).

<sup>39</sup> Medard Kehl, Stephan Ch. Kessler, *Priesterlich werden. Anspruch für Laien und Kleriker*, Würzburg 2010, 19.

<sup>40</sup> The group of topics "office and leadership" is dealt with by the Synodal Forum "Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission".

<sup>41</sup> CCC 1546.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, in: VAS 105 (25 March 1992), No. 14: "In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ - the head and shepherd - authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation - particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit. In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the head and shepherd." *Pastores dabo vobis* No. 16 notes: "Inasmuch as he represents Christ the head, shepherd and spouse of the Church, the priest is placed not only in the Church but also in the forefront of the Church."

(66) Whereas the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Orders, acts “in the person of Christ the Head” (LG 10) when administering the sacraments, and the faithful hence receive an assurance that the grace of the sacrament applies regardless of the holiness of the person administering it, this ministry to the people of God has no higher dignity or holiness. “The configuration of the priest to Christ the head - namely, as the principal source of grace - does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others.”<sup>43</sup>

(67) Not only against the background of the scandal of sexual abuse in the Church, and of the findings of the MHG Study, it is important that the priest, outside the celebration of the sacraments, does not take on the role of Christ Himself and confuse himself with the voice of God, and is not mistaken for this voice by the faithful. Such sacral glorification can lead to spiritual abuse of power.

### 5.3. The sacramental nature of ordained ministry

(68) The sacramental ministry is part and parcel of the “essence” of what is Catholic. The sacramental understanding of the priest corrects a purely functional view of the ministry. The priest’s sacramental ministry is in essence a service rendered for unity “which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” in the celebration of the Eucharist (LG 11). This ministry of unity, as assessed in “Gemeinsam Kirche sein”, which is indispensable for the Church, is the unique feature of the priestly ministry. The sacramentality of the priesthood, and the holiness of the Church, by no means imply flawlessness. Pope Francis emphasises unequivocally: “The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative”.<sup>44</sup>

(69) The ordained priest has the task of expressing the standard of the Gospel, and of making clear in his sacramental actions “that God is faithful, that Christ Himself is present in the Church: real, concrete, personal and unadulterated”.<sup>45</sup> Ordination does not release him from the necessity to strive for credibility. “Gemeinsam Kirche sein” explains the wording of the

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<sup>43</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 104. A note on the orientation of ontological statements towards the priesthood. A person who is ordained to the priesthood is the holder of a “character indelebilis”; he has been given an “indelible stamp”, and differs in “essentia” (ablative) “in essence” from the non-ordained faithful. These statements are not easy to understand. Firstly, because they presuppose an Aristotelian teaching of reality, which is not readily compatible with today’s understanding of reality. But it would be possible to cope with this given a few hermeneutic aids. It becomes more difficult if one interprets the ontological statements, which has often happened, in the sense of an essential superiority of the priest, thus encouraging a form of clerical glorification. It is therefore important to recall the meaning and the purpose of the ontological statements: If the Lord brings about grace and salvation in the Church through the sacraments, then the effective potential of the sacramental-priestly ministry must be existent independently of the moral disposition of the minister. This could however only be expressed in ontological categories. Perhaps an image helps to understand this: There is a road, a path to salvation, and it is secured with guard rails. The ontological reflections are, as it were, guard rails for reflection: If the believing person is so disposed, the administration of the sacrament by the priest can only be one thing, namely the mediation of salvation, regardless of the circumstances. However, if one confuses the reflections that are supposed to protect the lasting effectiveness of the priestly action with reflections that have the priestly state at their centre, then one confuses the road and the guard rail. But engineers who know how to make guard rails are neither road workers nor vehicles, nor the drivers who use the roads. The Church has unfortunately trained far too many engineers who only know how to build guard rails and crash barriers, and has sadly neglected road construction, vehicle construction, as well as driving instruction.

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et exultate* on the call to holiness in today’s world. VAS 213 (19 March 2018), No. 52.

<sup>45</sup> *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 37.

constitution resulting from the Council Lumen gentium 10, “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated”. It is said not to be a matter of a larger quantity of holiness or dignity; in fact, the essential difference consists in the sacramental ministry to the community and the congregation. Such ministry of unity may also be realised by priests through their ministry of leadership. Here it is entirely at the service of the episcopate, which is the primary addressee of the ministry of unity.

(70) Leadership is a broad and open term.<sup>46</sup> It serves in essence to enable participation by many in the diverse tasks of the Church. Leadership seeks the spiritual gifts, and it enables their realisation among other things in the ministry for the unity of the Church. Leadership by priests understands “being church together” not in the sense of an isolated “rule”, but as a relational event. The priest himself is already in a sacramental relationship with the bishop, and shares in his leadership ministry. For without the bishop, there is no priest. Priests act “in collaboration with their bishops.<sup>47</sup> The fellowship of the presbytery should also clarify the ministry of unity as a relational event. Baptised Christians participate in leadership with their gifts and professions. In addition, leadership is more than mere decision-making competence. With regard to the Vatican Instruction entitled “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church” of the Congregation for the Clergy of 20 July 2020 it has to be pointed out: An expanded concept of leadership is called for in order to not only carry out the debates on competences and tasks under church law. Priestly leadership does not merely consist of being a pastor, but it is rather to be understood from the three offices of Christ. Proclaiming the Gospel is the primary task of the leadership ministry<sup>48</sup>.

(71) It is a much-lamented dilemma of the pastoral profession that administration and organisation overshadow the necessary pastoral care and spiritual leadership. This also entails the danger of functionalising the priestly vocation. The functions of other pastoral vocations, and their derivation from the episcopal ministry, should also be considered in this context.

#### 5.4. The evangelical counsels

(72) The evangelical counsels which Jesus proposes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), namely of poverty, chastity and obedience, can be adopted by all believers as an expression of a life of following Christ. (cf. LG 39). All three are mandatory under church law for faithful who have opted for them through profession in institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life (cf. can. 573 §1 CIC). They are a possible answer to the question of what it means to leave everything and follow Christ (Mt 10:28). Especially when it comes to possessions, celibacy and power, they also serve to flesh out discipleship for the so-called secular priest, who is called “to live these counsels in accordance with those ways and, more specifically, those goals and

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 41 et sqq.

<sup>47</sup> PO 77.

<sup>48</sup> For priests are brothers among brothers (74) with all those who have been reborn at the baptismal font. They are all members of one and the same Body of Christ, the building up of which is required of everyone. (75) Priests, therefore, must take the lead in seeking the things of Jesus Christ, not the things that are their own. (76) They must work together with the lay faithful, and conduct themselves in their midst after the example of their Master, who among men “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as redemption for many” (Mt 20:28). (PO 74-77a).



that basic meaning which derive from and express his own priestly identity”.<sup>49</sup> This applies not only to celibacy (chastity), but also to the way he deals with property (poverty) and power (obedience).

(73) The ministry of a priest is not only to be characterised by solidarity with the poor and deprived, but it is necessary to allow oneself to be evangelised by them.<sup>50</sup> As an indication of this, he is to live out his interactions in accordance with the evangelical counsel of poverty, which also needs to be re-examined with regard to remuneration and a critical handling of other financial possibilities (cf. can. 282 §1 and 2 CIC).

(74) The evangelical counsel of the obedience of the priest towards the bishop and the Church in relation to the ministry to the people of God concerns the area of power, and is spelled out anew in practical terms in the implementation texts, which themselves deal with professionalisation.

(75) Chastity, or celibacy, is intended to signify the representation of Christ and the prophetic dimension of the priestly ministry. Despite and due to manifold encounters and commitments, many priests lack both the experience of being embedded in the everyday life of the people of God, as well as that of experiencing acceptance of and support for their way of life by the concrete community of the faithful. The lack of having a home may lead to loneliness through one’s own fault and the fault of others. This background is also significant with regard to offender type 3 (cf. Chapter 3).

(76) The celibate way of life presupposes a way of life that is rich in relationships, both within the Church as well as with regard to wider worldly relational structures. This however poses a risk of the celibate way of life leading to marginalisation if the symbolism is no longer supported by large sections of the people of God. In addition, sacramentality itself is at risk if celibacy is neither spiritually understood nor lived out in concrete, credible terms, and is tacitly and collectively undermined in a double life that is tolerated by the church leadership. We therefore propose a review of the link between the conferral of ordination and the commitment to celibacy.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.5. Working as a priest in a synodal Church

(77) Around 10,000 secular priests, and roughly 2,000 priests in religious orders, ordained in Germany, as well as about 1,400 priests ordained in a foreign diocese, are active in the Church in Germany in a wide variety of areas.<sup>52</sup> A majority, but not all, are active in pastoral care in parishes. Other areas of activity include pastoral care of foreigners, pastoral care in universities and schools, adult education, or academies, Caritas, the associations and spiritual communities, youth pastoral care, hospital pastoral care and pastoral care for persons with disabilities, the Church’s administration or the exercise of priestly activity in a secondary office (e.g. “worker

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<sup>49</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, No. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198.

<sup>51</sup> For more detailed explanations see: implementation text “The celibacy of priests - strengthening and opening”.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. in this regard: Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (publisher), *Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral*. May 2021, 3.

priests”). Bishops are ordained deacons or priests, too.<sup>53</sup> The ministry of the priest cannot therefore be reduced to that of the parish priest, but is regarded in terms of its sacramental dimension.

(78) The jointly-trodden path (syn-hodos) is largely determined by the method (“met-hodos” - the path towards something). Pope Francis referred to this method in his address at the opening of the synod on young people as “an ecclesial exercise in discernment”, consisting in a three-step process of spiritual discernment - perceiving, interpreting and choosing.<sup>54</sup> If the Church and the synod are synonymous,<sup>55</sup> then priests serve to call the people of God in their respective areas by accompanying them in spiritual processes, in joint consultation, decision-making and leadership.

(79) This requires a twofold perception and connection which establishes a joyful identity of the priest, as Pope Francis sets forth in his “Letter to priests”: “For our hearts to be encouraged, we should not neglect the dialectic that determines our identity. First, our relationship with Jesus. [...] The other essential aspect of this dialectic is our relationship to our people”.<sup>56</sup> In the second step of the synodal method that what has been perceived has to be distinguished.<sup>57</sup> Synodality is not an end in itself after all, but “the innermost goal of the Synod as an instrument of the implementation of Vatican II can only be mission”<sup>58</sup>.

(80) The synodal approach means a change and inculturation of attitudes and structures, as explained in the corresponding implementation texts.

## 5.6. The priest’s following of Christ in this time and in this society

(81) Pope Francis calls in “Querida Amazonia” for an “Inculturation of forms of ministry”.<sup>59</sup> This applies not only to the Amazonas.<sup>60</sup> Inculturation is a twofold movement which includes both

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. in this regard: Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference (publisher), *Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral*. May 2021, 9-19. The age structure will be added to.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Address at the opening of the synod on young people (3 October 2018): [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa101francesco\\_20181003\\_apertura-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa101francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html).

<sup>55</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: *Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Arbeitshilfen 276)*, published by the Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference, Bonn 2015, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars (4 August 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, p. 27. Cf. for the interaction between hierarchical and charismatic gifts: *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter “Iuvenescit Ecclesia” to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church*, in: VAS 205 (15 May 2016).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: *Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Arbeitshilfen 276)*, published by the Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference, Bonn 2015, p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, in: VAS 222 (2 February 2020), Nos. 85-90, here No. 85: “Inculturation should also be increasingly reflected in an incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry. If we are to inculturate spirituality, holiness and the Gospel itself, how can we not consider an inculturation of the ways we structure and carry out ecclesial ministries?”.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 115: “Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.”

the transformation of culture through the Gospel, as well as receiving the Holy Spirit from culture.<sup>61</sup> This leads to two questions, on the one hand with regard to the way of life of the priest in our society, but on the other hand concerning the concrete life of the individual priest: (1) What does inculturation mean for a specific way of life of the priest in our secular and global society in which individual freedom and equality are highly valued? (2) This poses the following question for the priest, as it does for all faithful: How can faith be lived in an inculturated authentic and dialogic manner, i.e. in dialogue and thus full of tension, between a religiously-motivated counter-culture and a bourgeois way of life, and against the horizon of globalisation and the changes that it brings? All processes of change in the present reveal only one thing in the final analysis: The priesthood is embedded in history, and is therefore always to be understood as an incarnatory process. New forms of organisation, as they are to be shaped in the future and to some extent already now after the end of the popular church structures, call for a variety of configurations of priestly ministries.

## 6. Final remarks

(82) We are faced with the challenge of developing the theology of ordination in such a way that its essence, founded in Scripture and tradition, is preserved, while at the same time overcoming its elements that are no longer in keeping with the times, that promote clericalism and encourage abuse.

(83) In order to enable a genuine inculturation of the Catholic theory and tradition of priestly ministry into today's society, other topics also need to be considered which, however, to a large extent have universal church dimensions.

(84) For this reason, the developed implementation texts are to a large extent proposals to the universal church processing, primarily in a synod or even in a council. This also applies to a gender-just approach and systemic corrections in view of the crimes of abuse. At the same time, the tasks that can already be implemented are urgent: the change in the training regulations that takes all pastoral professional groups into consideration, the needs of professionalisation and personality development, joint leadership and decision-making.

(85) With the implementation text "The celibacy of priests - strengthening and opening"<sup>62</sup> and further considerations to "Plural ministry structures as an opportunity - Overcoming clericalism", the Synodal Assembly formulates petitions to the universal Church. The same applies to the demand for the admission of women and queer people, which is largely uncontroversial in Germany, as it is the subject of the implementation texts from the Synodal Forum "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" as well as the reflections on participation from the Synodal Forum "Power and Separation of Powers in the Church - Joint Participation and Involvement in

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, No. 68: "On the one hand, a fruitful process takes place when the Gospel takes root in a given place, for "whenever a community receives the message of salvation, the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel". On the other hand, the Church herself undergoes a process of reception that enriches her with the fruits of what the Spirit has already mysteriously sown in that culture. In this way, "the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face". In the end, this means allowing and encouraging the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel to be preached "in categories proper to each culture, creating a new synthesis with that particular culture".

<sup>62</sup> Cf. implementation text "The celibacy of priests - strengthening and opening".

the Mission"<sup>63</sup>. At the same time, the bishops in Germany are looking for ways to implement the recommendations of the MHG study.

(86) With the presented fundamental approach to the priestly form of life, to the re-accentuation of the theology of priestly ministry, as well as the view of the pastoral practice of the local churches in Germany, a basis for further work is presented here, which requires further discussion.

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. for example <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/umfrage-zwei-drittel-gegen-pflichtzoelibat-und-fuer-priesterinnen>.