



## Foundational text

# Women in ministries and offices in the Church

Decision of the Synodal Path adopted by the Synodal Assembly on September 9, 2022

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## 1. Introduction

(1) Demanding gender justice as the basis for all future courses of action in the Roman Catholic Church is the guiding principle of the following observations. “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). These encouraging words of Paul guide the reflections that follow below. Divisions according to origin, status and gender are abolished in the community that confesses Jesus as Christ. A consequence of the common priesthood of each individual believer in Christ, founded in baptism, is the participation of all in the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel in the world. Because all are “one in Christ Jesus” the non-admission of women to ecclesiastical ordained ministry urgently requires a renewed theological and anthropological review in the light of the current signs of the times. Living out gender equality in the sense of God’s instructions as handed down in the Bible in the changing cultural and social contexts shall form the basis for the future course of action in the Roman Catholic Church.

(2) This means in concrete terms that all who are baptised and confirmed, experience acknowledgement and appreciation of their charisms and of their spiritual vocation, which must not depend on their gender identity; they become active, according to their aptitude, their abilities and skills, in ministries and offices which serve the proclamation of the Gospel in our time.

(3) The institutional, official form of the Church is to be shaped at all times in such a way that She opens up a broad space for the message of God into which all people would like to enter. Every course of action which strengthens faithful trust, which substantiates the hope of Easter, which enables love to be experienced, and which serves to build up the Christian community, is to receive recognition. To be excluded as a woman\* from the official representation of Christ is scandalous. For many Christians, it obscures the message of the Gospel, the proclamation of which was entrusted to the female Easter witnesses. Put to constructive use, this has an energising impact and motivates people to act. It is in the sense of the proclamation of the Easter Gospel, to which Jesus Christ also called women from the beginning, to call for a new orientation: It is not participation by women in all the Church’s ministries and offices that requires justification, but indeed the exclusion of women from the sacramental ministry. The fundamental question is: What is the will of God with regard to the participation of women in the ministry of proclamation of the Gospel? Who can claim to be able to give an answer to this question for time immemorial, and on the basis of what criteria?

(4) The doctrine of 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis'<sup>1</sup> is not accepted and understood by the people of God in large parts. Therefore, the question must be addressed to the highest authority in the Church (Pope and Council) whether the teaching of 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis' should be reviewed: In the service of evangelisation, it is a matter of enabling the appropriate participation of women in preaching, in the sacramental representation of Christ and in the building up of the Church. Whether or not the doctrine of 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis' binds the Church infallibly must then be examined and clarified bindingly at this level (cf. also 5.3).

(5) The question of the ministries and offices of women in the Church of Jesus Christ, especially participation by women in the sacramental ministry, makes it seem necessary to learn to read the "signs of the times", in addition to looking at Scripture and at tradition, and at the potential given in these sources for opening up the ministries to women. This absolutely must include reflecting on the different theological positions from the perspective of gender equality, entering into a close exchange with the social sciences, cultural studies and human sciences, and constructively taking up their reflections on gender theory. It should also be borne in mind in this context that there are people in the Roman Catholic Church who do not feel that their gender identity is adequately accommodated in the distinction between men and women. They are not specifically addressed in this text, but as people who are also affected, they are included in most of the statements on gender justice presented here. It should be noted in our thematic context that reservations against women's participation in the sacramental ministry in the representation of Christ are derived from the Scripture and from tradition. A critical examination of these arguments goes hand in hand with openness to the possibility of all people participating in the ordained ministry.

(6) There are many ways to approach the goal of gender equality that has been formulated. An argumentative effort has been selected here: The memory of experiences of sexualised violence and spiritual abuse committed by men against women inspires to decisive action, in which a readiness to repent is central (Part 2). There is a need to ground the argumentation in Biblical theology (Part 3). Anthropological, historical, systematic theological and practical theological arguments justify the position that has been taken up (Parts 4 and 5). The outlook for the Church's present proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be considered in view of the arguments set out above (Part 6).

(7) There is a wealth of literature worldwide on all the aspects that are addressed here. Our contribution has been written with the perspective that it will be heard by the universal Church and that it will be implemented accordingly. It is highly desirable that in all places of the earth people will embark together on a journey of dialogue regarding the concerns and insights presented here. Every theological argument is placed in a context. The perception of spiritual abuse and of sexualised violence against women and girls has caused resistance to injustice to grow strong in the Church in Germany and has demanded theological thinking and appropriate activities with a great degree of urgency.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994).

## 2. The challenges of our time

### 2.1 Frightening: clerical and sexual abuse as well as sexual and sexualised violence against women and girls

(8) Girls and women had remained largely invisible as victims of sexual abuse in the Church until very recently. It is only of late that the German-speaking world has started to look at those victims who suffered spiritual and sexual abuse in the Church as adults. Many of them find it difficult to tell their stories. In addition to the often traumatic and shameful experiences, they are frequently not believed, or are even blamed, or thought to share the blame, for what they have suffered. The women affected are often confronted with institutional “non-competence”, for instance by victims’ commissioners who point out that they are allegedly not responsible for adults. This makes them victims of an abuse of power once more. Retraumatization may occur as a result of such actions.

#### 2.1.1 The potential dangers lying in the doctrine and the system of the Roman Catholic Church

(9) Abuse takes place in specific power and gender constellations. It is a question of the credibility of the Church and of justice to take note of the group of women victims, and to take them seriously. The Church is exposed to the same dangers as other communities: Weaknesses among particularly vulnerable persons are exploited; existing inequalities are consolidated, and power is abused. Special systemic factors need to be taken into account in the Church. Spiritual abuse is an integral part of the planning and preparation of sexualised violence in many cases. Particular potential for danger lies in a double asymmetry that is specifically Roman Catholic in nature: When priests commit abuse, they are endowed with spiritual authority as clerics; as men, they are in a privileged position because of their gender. The MHG Study has identified a certain dominant habitus of priests as clerics who are likely to commit abuse: It can be observed in cases of sexual and spiritual abuse that church ministers sacralise their own person, and legitimise their deeds by claiming to act in the name of Jesus Christ. Victims furthermore report that they were placed in a docile, servile or even submissive role with reference to Mary in which they felt that they had to tacitly accept the abuse although in the “Magnificat” a self-determined, courageous, strong woman, namely Mary, prophesies that the dynamics of power relations will be overthrown. As long as women continue to be identified with the image of Eve as a seductress, they seem responsible for the actions of men, who are supposedly defenceless against seduction. In many cases, it is perpetrator-victim reversal strategies that lead girls and women in the context of abuse to feel ashamed of their experiences of abuse because they feel guilty, and it is suggested that they are complicit in what has happened - an event that they neither sought out nor provoked, nor actively shaped.

(10) Women have been and still are perpetrators, connivers and concealers in many contexts of abuse in the church sphere, in addition to male decision-makers. This has to be taken into account when it comes to reappraising and preventing abuse. There are also modes of conduct on the part of Christians, both women and men, that reinforce the dominance of men in the clergy, and enhance the danger of spiritual and sexual abuse, for example by adopting a submissive attitude towards ministers.

### 2.1.2 The potential dangers lying in pastoral care and the celebration of the sacraments

(11) Acts of pastoral care and the celebration of the sacraments, as forms of human communication, are always sensual, for example when it comes to the laying on of hands, anointing, distribution of Eucharistic gifts, and gestures of blessing. These acts are beneficial, but they also constitute a potential danger. Spiritual and sexual abuse frequently happens in the context of sacramental celebrations, or in other pastoral care situations, because they involve a complex relationship of power and dependence, and this is rooted in the professional role of the pastoral worker. Such constellations pose the risk of favouring physical, emotional, spiritual or psychological assault and manipulation. The fact that girls and women predominantly encounter male pastoral workers in most pastoral situations is a challenging issue against the background of these experiences. Especially the official ministry reserved for men in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation was abused despite significant threat of punishment; for this reason the confessional became a place of horror for large numbers of girls and women. Stories from affected women reveal the extent to which their faith was damaged by the abuse that they suffered. Every further liturgical celebration can then have a re-traumatising effect. The victims are thus denied an important source of resilience. All that remains are the communal sacramental celebrations of reconciliation and anointing of the sick, which, however, women cannot lead, but can only help to organise.

### 2.1.3 The danger to women in church employment

(12) Women are underrepresented in positions of responsibility in many church contexts, especially in pastoral care. This also applies to women in leading positions within voluntary work. In this structure, many of them have to deal with sexism that is experienced on a daily basis which not infrequently emanates from male superiors. The relationship between proximity and distance is not easy to regulate appropriately. Abuse of power perpetrated by clerics humiliates women who work in full-time and honorary positions. Such discrimination reinforces women's desire to exercise leadership in pastoral and sacramental contexts themselves. Such aspirations on the part of women are often defamed as an illegitimate assumption of power, without at the same time admitting that the existing constellations particularly imply such relationships of power.

(13) When describing the motivation of women to take on and shape ministries and offices in the church, it is obvious from the position of the office holders to see in them above all people who want to be on an equal footing with them. Such a view, influenced by issues of power, changes when the realisation is achieved that many women do not aspire to an office previously denied to them, but out of pure joy in proclaiming the Gospel, respect their own charisms and feel called by God to render service in the community of faith.

## 2.2 Insight: Gender equality in the debate within society

(14) The demand for justice concerns all types of social relations and relationships, and therefore also gender relations and social gender relationships. Gender equality is achieved when every person in the respective social context, irrespective of their gender affiliation or identity,

has equal rights and opportunities to partake of assets, and has access to positions, and is thus able to lead a self-determined life.

(15) European traditions in philosophy, theology and politics have led in the Christian era to identifying what is “human” with the male, and have thus brought about an androcentric gender order. The hierarchisation to which this has led has resulted today in all “non-male” people having to repeatedly demand universal equality in terms of human rights. Agreements such as the European Convention on Human Rights (and in particular Article 14, Prohibition of discrimination) are therefore needed, as are strategies that lead to a reduction in man-made gender-related inequalities, and thus to gender equality.

(16) The Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) that is in force in Germany establishes in Article 3 the fundamental equality of all human beings, irrespective of all existing differences in regard to gender, parentage, language, disability, homeland, faith, religious or political opinions. Thus, the state is to promote “the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and take steps to eliminate disadvantages that now exist” (Art 3 para. 2 of the Basic Law). In order to accommodate this, further detailed legal provisions are constantly being made in order to overcome enduring disregard for gender equality. The existing situation still leaves much to be desired; there is a constant need for new changes and adaptations.

(17) There are different ideas in the debate within society as to what gender equality could and should look like. Social developments such as globalisation, migration, European integration, pluralisation of lifestyles, demographic change or social movements, include diverse perspectives concerning this topic. It must be borne in mind, for instance, that not all women can be subsumed under one “we”; one might name as examples migrant women, women of colour, Jewish women, lesbians, or women with disabilities. Their experience around the world, and in Germany, is that they are also regarded as “the others”, over and above the question of their gender identity and are consequently excluded. There is an urgent need for a differentiated analysis of the manner in which injustice is created, experienced and justified (not only) via gender.

(18) Gender should therefore be seen in a multidimensional perspective. Social or socio-cultural gender, as it presents itself or is taken for granted in a specific cultural context, is the result of a social process. Thus, the manifold differences within the genders are taken seriously. At the same time, the question of the binary understanding of sexuality is to be posed with renewed sensitivity against this background on the basis of experience and of research findings.

(19) When speaking about a person’s gender, judgments are made about different androcentrically-defined characteristics, abilities, interests and needs of women and men, which are often regarded as biologically determined. They become the basis of argumentation for a definition of the relationships between the genders, as well as for justifying their supposedly just place in society. In order to achieve gender equality, the respective understanding of the gender relationship must therefore be discussed above all. There are positions here which emphasise the difference between the genders more strongly. Others stress the equality of the genders over their differences. In addition, there are approaches that elaborate a conceivable coexistence of difference and equality.

(20) The position of the difference was formed in bourgeois society as a model of gender complementarity. It assumes that the female complements the male, or it even tends to subordinate the female to the male. As a response to the assumption of this hierarchical-patriarchal order of the genders, feminism brings about a positive re-evaluation of female values and ways of life, and thus of traditional gender roles and characters. However, such a view, positive in itself, according to which women are assigned their own sphere in society, or such a role is claimed by them, also has its dangers: It can have a suppressing effect, and may neglect the criticism of the lasting validity of prevailing power dynamics.

(21) By contrast, the equality position especially put forward in sociological concepts is thus opposed to traditional gender characters and gender roles, androcentrism and the various forms of sexism. The goal of the equality approach is for women to participate in the male-dominated spheres where power, wealth and prestige are distributed. However, it tends to reduce justice to formal equality, and to consider in abstract terms the differences between the genders that exist in the cultural and social spheres.

(22) Equality and difference are correlated in the methods that seek to overcome the dilemmas arising from these positions. The demand for equality has its starting point in the fact that what is being compared is different. This approach is based on the idea of the subject as an autonomous, self-identical individual: There is neither the woman nor the man. The diversity of life contexts and of lifestyles, as well as of individual experience, have meaning and intrinsic value when it comes to determining gender equality. This approach presents a difficult task: The principles of difference and equality must be combined: Neither can difference be intrinsically justified, nor can equality be conceived without heterogeneity. Following on from this concept, it is important to perceive each person as a distinct personality, and to hold his or her charms in respect.

(23) The question of gender equality is constantly being raised anew, also at worldwide level, in view of the processes of social transformation and of the changes that are currently taking place in the world of business, work and life. The answer to this question is closely connected to the questioning of the conditions prevailing in each case, and exerts an impact on the possibilities and opportunities of a gender-independent perception of all functions, offices and occupations in society as well as in the Church. Role attributions as part of a polarity that is orientated towards the supposedly natural nature of the sexes are often very critically questioned in today's society; there is frequently a lack of an echo of this in a church context. The structures and power relations in the Roman Catholic Church today are essentially determined by cultural patterns shaped over thousands of years. While the images of women and men are changing rapidly in our culture, the Church is officially sticking to the old roles and tasks for women and men for the time being. As in society, women are underrepresented in church leadership despite current efforts. Jobs held by women are lower in the hierarchy, have less social prestige and are paid less. Women's access to sacramental ministry is closed. Critical questions are increasingly being asked of the Church, both from society and from within the Church. As a result, the Church is now supportively accompanying the struggle for gender relations and gender justice, which has been going on for more than a century but is still far too hesitant to make it a matter of Her own heart and is even less likely to accept it as a mandate for Her own work.

### 2.3 Diagnosis: a need for comprehensive reform

(24) Both an admission of guilt and a change in awareness and behaviour are urgently required in view of the horror of spiritual and sexualised violence against women, and of the continuing marginalisation of and discrimination against women in the Roman Catholic Church.

(25) The Second Vatican Council says of the Church that She is “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.”<sup>2</sup> In every age, the Church is called to renew Herself on the model of Her apostolic origin, and to live the proclamation of the Easter message as Her mission.

(26) The “social structure of the Church”<sup>3</sup> in which God’s Spirit is at work, as recalled by the Second Vatican Council, is also determined in the public perception above all by the form of ministries and offices that people perform in the Church. From a theological perspective too, the Church takes on Her visible form primarily in liturgical celebrations, in catechesis and in diakonia. The responsible staff working there are measured against a high standard: to always and repeatedly represent Jesus Christ approximately as the one reason for the actions of the Church.

(27) How do people recognise the presence of Jesus Christ in His Holy Spirit? Paul’s exhortations are clear in the statement: There must be no personal boasting (cf. 1 Cor 1:29-31). Gifts and spiritual attitudes characterise people in following Jesus: willingness to reconcile, kindness, humility, perseverance, attention to one another, time for one another, and so many good things besides. The marks of love that Paul mentions in 1 Cor 13 are the starting point for a common discernment process with regard to women’s access to ministry and thus the constant reform programme of all Churches.

(28) Many people today (still) measure the Church by the behaviour of those holding leadership positions. It is irrelevant for most people today whether it is a man or a woman who steps up to represent the Christian Church. What is important above all is that individuals in leading church ministries endeavour again and again to live as Jesus Christ did.

## 3. The Biblical background

(29) The Scriptures of the Bible contain different perceptions of humankind. The Jewish and Christian exegesis of recent decades has recognised the great degree to which the Bible speaks of the many different ministries that women exercised. In addition, the exegesis has elaborated the impact exercised by social structures in Antiquity on the Scriptures and on their transmission, but also on the development of the offices and ministries themselves.

### 3.1 The fact of all humans having been made in the image of God in Creation

(30) The first Creation story emphasises the equality of the genders: Human beings were created first and foremost as a human image of God (living statue of God), in God’s likeness. Only afterwards is it stated that there is a male and a female variant (Gen 1:26-27). The text is directed

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<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

against the multifarious world of gods and goddesses in Antiquity. The one deity is not human-shaped (anthropomorphic), but humans are very much god-shaped (theomorphic), regardless of their gender.

(31) Especially in Ancient Egypt, the King - and sometimes also the Queen - was considered a human image of a deity. Gen 1:26-27 transfers this royal privilege to all human beings. The fact of having been made in the image of God demands of all humans that they carry out God's will and organise their community collectively (cf. Gen 1:28), regardless of their social origin or gender. God Himself considers this egalitarian order to be "very good" (Gen 1:31).

### **3.2 (Sexual) violence against women in the Bible**

(32) The Scriptures do not describe only the original good condition of the world. They also show numerous ruptures in the relationship with God and between the genders. In many cases, they tacitly presuppose the subordination of women, even in sexual relationships. On the other hand, they repeatedly draw attention to the problems of this gender (dis)order.

(33) The law of succession deals exclusively with the question of which sons are to inherit (cf. Deut 21:15-17). Women are not mentioned as witnesses in court (cf. Num 35:30), and marriage is usually seen as an arrangement between men in which women change hands as chattel (cf. e.g. Gen 29:1-30; Tob 7:9-17). Women face multiple structural disadvantages, and are therefore particularly vulnerable to abuses of power. Holy Scripture also recognises the particular abuse of power through sexual violence, but sharply condemns it. It reveals that such violence can be cloaked by the term "love", for example in the case of Dinah (cf. Gen 34:3) or Tamar (cf. 2 Sam 13:1).

(34) Several prophetic texts describe a woman being stripped and publicly humiliated as a punishment. Such scenes are considered metaphors for the destruction of the kingdom of Judah (Jer 13:15-27), the northern kingdom of Israel (Hos 2-3), and/or the cities of Jerusalem and Samaria (Ez 23 and 16, as well as Lamentations 1:8-9). This ranges through to rape, which is considered in this image to constitute punishment for premarital sex (Ez 23:3), adultery (Jer 13:27; Ez 23:4-8, 11-27), and pride (Isa 47:7-8). Non-adherence to sexual norms stands metaphorically for cult practices which, according to the prophets, are to be punished. The punishment - in the image rape, in reality the conquest and destruction of a city or country - thus appears to be logical and just.

(35) The scenes portrayed in the Bible reveal a disastrous fundamental attitude that attributes blame for abuse to the victims of that very abuse. Such an attitude prevents many victims from addressing or reporting the violence that they have experienced down to the present day.

(36) Conversely, Holy Scripture shows in several places how women remain able to act, even in situations of extreme powerlessness. After Tamar is raped by her half-brother Amnon, she resists the demand to cover up and makes her hurt and grief public through ritual mourning (2 Sam 13:1-22). Susannah can only narrowly avert being coerced into sexual intercourse. She is slandered as an adulterer by the perpetrators in a reversal of guilt during the subsequent court proceedings, and is not allowed to present her version of events. She turns to God as her only



ally. He sends her help in the shape of Daniel, who testifies to her innocence, convicts the perpetrators and thus gives her justice (cf. Dan 13).

(37) The Song of Songs paints a positive counterimage of a different kind, portraying an innocent, non-violent, consensual relationship on an equal footing.

### 3.3 Patriarchy, kyriarchy and its reversal in the Holy Scriptures

(38) The violence-ridden social order in which the Scriptures were written is often referred to as a “patriarchy” (domination by fathers). The term “kyriarchy” (rule by a Lord) is however increasingly gaining ground in the exegesis and in other disciplines. What is meant by this is that a community is headed by a single man (*kyrios*) to whom all, women and men alike, must submit. This applies in general terms to the “house”, the residential and economic community of an extended family. But it is also true for the political community, presided over by a king, or for the temple staff, which is headed by the high priest. Certain women can indeed exert an influence in such orders - in some cases also over men who are their social inferiors, but always in subordination and assignment to the one man at the top (cf. e.g. Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1:11-31). Obviously, gender is a factor of structural inequality in many biblical texts, as the paragraph itself states. Intersectional exegetical approaches presuppose this, but go further by noting that gender is only one of many factors that determine one's place and agency in society - others include social rank, health, income, and so on. This is why, for example, Bathsheba can plot to bring her son Solomon to the throne, which in turn gives her influence that other women and men do not have. It is precisely one of the effects of patriarchy or kyriarchy that women have to take a detour through men and use more subtle means of power in order to achieve their goals. This is often at the expense of structurally worse-off men and women (another example is the story of Potiphar, his wife and Joseph in Gen 39).

(39) Whilst the Holy Scriptures take this kyriarchal order for granted in many places, they also contain ideas that break through this order. In the Old Testament, it is the foremothers and numerous women who lead the people of God as prophets and judges (cf. e.g. Deborah in Judges 4-5). The daughters of Zelophehad claim and receive their father's heritage (cf. Num 27:1-11).

(40) Also worthy of mention are the non-Israelite women who are specifically mentioned in Jesus' family tree (Mt 1:1-17), although otherwise only the male, kyriarchal lineage counts. Jesus' behaviour also shows that He undermines and abolishes the principles of the kyriarchy. He repeatedly refers to the heavenly Father and Lord, under whom all people become equal brothers and sisters. He snubs his physical and social family, and instead starts a new, equal family of God which is to live by heavenly standards (cf. Mt 12:49-50).

(41) There is no mention of priestesses in the Old Testament. Whilst priestesses are documented elsewhere in Antiquity, this is not the case in Jerusalem. Potential reasons that are given include ritual purity regulations, which at times excluded women from ritual acts due to inability to worship during menstruation (Lev 15:9-30). Taboos on marriage and childbearing may also play a role. All this however remains speculative, given that there is no Biblical substantiation of the non-existence of priestesses.

(42) The typical Greek term for priest (*hiereus*) is never used in the New Testament for specific ministries or offices in the early Christian communities (*ecclesia*). Hebrews declares that believers in Christ have (only) *one* High Priest, namely Jesus Christ (Heb 3:1; 4:14; 5:10). In the Book of Revelation, the term “priest” is considered a dignitary title for all who are baptised (Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The teaching of the common priesthood of all faithful ties in with this. People who have found faith in Jesus Christ are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9).

### 3.4 “The Twelve” and “the Apostles” are not the same

(43) Terms such as “apostles”, “the Twelve”, “presbyters”, “deacons” and “episcopos” are more common and more powerful in the New Testament writings than the term “priest”. We must first distinguish between what can be attributed to the historical Jesus, and what happened after Easter. Both are only accessible to us through the texts of the Gospels, which were written later. In between the two comes Paul, who wrote to the communities outside Palestine even before the Gospels were written. His letters thus reflect the oldest use of the word “apostle” in early Christianity. This usage is distinct from that of Luke, who, after Paul’s death, writes a double work in the shape of his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles which specifically seeks to emphasise the concern for historical continuity between Jesus before Easter, and the Church that emerges after Easter. The understanding of what an apostle is, whether male or female, therefore changes within this period.

(44) First of all, the historical Jesus: Mark, the oldest Evangelist, reports that Jesus chose twelve men and “appointed [them] that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14). These Twelve point to the twelve tribes of Israel, and thus to Jesus’ claim to gather together the new Israel (cf. Lk 22:28-30; Mt 19:28). Since the kyriarchal principle of the applicable social order held that the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel were male, the symbolically-appointed representatives of the new Israel could only be male, otherwise the sign would not have been understood. In the post-Easter period of the early Church, Paul now speaks several times in his letters of a group of Apostles (Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 9:5; 15:9; cf. Gal 1:17 and 19). Research however shows that this group was not identical to the circle of the Twelve appointed by Jesus before Easter. The “Apostles”, according to Paul, were in fact people who could claim to have encountered the Risen Lord, and who considered themselves as sent out by him; that is why Paul refers to himself as an apostle (cf. 1 Cor 9:1; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1). The early Christian creed in 1 Cor 15:3-7 clearly distinguishes between the Twelve and “all the apostles”. The latter also included women, some of whose names are mentioned in the Gospels. According to the Gospels, women are witnesses to the death of Jesus, His burial and resurrection (Mark 15:40-41; Mt 28:1 and 9 to 10). In the Gospel according to John, it is Mary Magdalene who first encounters the Risen Lord and who is the first to receive the proclamation mission (John 20:1-18, Mt 28:9-10 and Mark 16:11); this is why the position of “*apostola apostolorum*”, a position which is elevated in comparison to the circle of the Twelve, is conveyed on her by the Latin Church Fathers. Pope Francis once again recalled this to the Church’s memory when he elevated her feast day to the liturgical rank of a feast, like that of the other apostles. Apostles are therefore public witnesses of the Risen Lord.

(45) The early Christian creed, to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians, only mentions male Easter witnesses by name, in contrast to the Gospel narratives (1 Cor 15:5-8). Why are the women not named here, even though they existed? It was customary in the socio-cultural context that only the testimony of men was considered as legally-admissible evidence in court in the event of a legal dispute. By naming only male witnesses, the formula legitimises the credibility of the creed. This however serves to exclude women from the ranks of those witnesses to the Easter story who are therefore eligible to use the title of apostle from the outset. Paul himself, on the other hand, claims this title of apostle for himself on the basis of his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9), and later also refers to others as “apostles”, including at least one woman (Junia: cf. Rom 16:7).

(46) The Evangelists Matthew and Luke equate the Apostles with the Twelve (Matthew 10:2; Luke 6:13). For Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, a unified group emerges in this way in the shape of “the Apostles” which stands for continuity between Jesus and the infant Church. When Matthew is elected to join the post-Easter circle of the Twelve, someone is nominated “who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us” Acts 1:21). The author of Luke’s double work therefore does not consider Paul to be an Apostle in this sense. The term “Twelve Apostles” is thus associated with Luke’s theological view of history: In Luke’s model of the Church, they remind us of “the teaching of the apostles” (Acts 2:42) as the decisive factor of continuity between the earthly Jesus and the post-Easter Church.

(47) Luke’s image of the Church is therefore not hierarchical pure and simple: The pericope of the upper room in which the eleven devoted themselves with one accord to prayer “together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14) is a memorable image of a fraternal original Church onto which the Spirit poured itself out without discrimination on the Day of Pentecost. Today’s ecclesiology can link into this Biblical image of Mary and of the Church.

(48) What suggests itself from the New Testament’s findings on the “Twelve” and the “Apostles”, which are not to be equated with them, for a contemporary discussion of ministries and offices in the Church? The argument that Jesus appointed “the Twelve”, and that they were exclusively men, follows the later perspective of Matthew, and especially Luke, who equates these twelve men with the Apostles who founded the Church. If, on the other hand, one starts from the concept of disciples, Jesus appointed and sent out men and women in His lifetime. The oldest tangible concept of an “Apostle” was ultimately orientated towards the encounter with and the sending out by the Risen Lord. And this group includes many people, men and women, from Mary Magdalene to Paul, Andronicos and Junia, including the twelve (or eleven) Apostles, together with Peter. The question therefore arises in general terms as to how far the selection of the Twelve is normative for the subsequent shaping of the Church’s ministry structure, given that such a circle of the Twelve is soon no longer mentioned as an authority. It should also be borne in mind that there are now several thousand bishops as “successors of the Apostles”. Why the question of gender alone should dictate the path ahead here can hardly be justified in terms of biblical exegesis.

### 3.5 Women in the New Testament congregations

(49) The early period of the Christian congregations in the cities of Asia Minor and in Rome is tangible in the Pauline Epistles, which were written a generation before the Gospels. The numerous women who are mentioned by name with their functions and tasks in the churches produce an impressive picture: Women were active, in the same way as and together with the men, in matters of church leadership as well as of church organisation. They were involved in the in-depth proclamation of the Gospel and in missionary work. This is not only true for the congregations founded by Paul, as the list of greetings in the Letter to the Romans shows. (cf. Rom 16).

(50) Since Paul also combines women's names with the masculine functional designations in male-centred language (*apostolos*, 16:7 for Junia, *diaconos* in Rom 16:1 for Phoebe), it cannot be ruled out that women are also referred to as part of the triad of "apostles, prophets and teachers" mentioned in 1 Cor 12:28, the 500 brothers mentioned in 1 Cor 15:6 to whom the Risen Lord appeared, as well as the bishops and deacons mentioned in Phil 1:1. It also suggests itself that, in the theologically important statement about being a child of God in Gal 4:4-7, the masculine form refers to both gender forms, so that women also receive the Spirit in the same way as men, and thus become "sons" and heirs in the same way as they do, and not underprivileged "daughters".

(51) Paul does not provide any information concerning how and by whom the Lord's Supper was led, nor does he use a specific term for such a task, either for men or for women. It is only after the New Testament that we see evidence of a presiding role at the Lord's Supper, which is then however reserved for a man.

(52) That having been said, key roles and leadership roles are recognisable which were probably held in most cases in concrete practice by the respective heads of the household, and in which some women's names have been passed down to us: Mary, the mother of John who is called Mark (Acts 12:12) in Jerusalem, Lydia (Acts 16:14-40) in Philippi, Prisca with her husband Aquila in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19) and Rome (Rom 16:3), also in Rome: Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, as well as the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus (cf. Rom 16:6-15), Nympha (cf. Col 4:15) in Laodicea, Apphia (cf. Phil 1-2) in Colossae, Phoebe (cf. Rom 16,1) in Cenchreae, as well as Chloë (cf. 1 Cor 1:11).

(53) The later image of the Church was not however primarily shaped by Paul's lists of greetings and charisms. The Gospel of St Luke limits the apostolate to the Twelve and singles out Peter in particular. In research, it is nevertheless considered "the Gospel of women" because it mentions many women by name and is the only one that mentions that also women followed Jesus on his preaching journeys in Galilee (Lk 8:1-3). Whereas the New Testament often refers to women in need of help, it is made clear here that women actively supported Jesus with their means. Recent exegesis, however, points out that this also changes the role of women between the time of Jesus and the time of Luke: Women like Mary of Magdala, who had a mission of proclamation with Jesus, become supporters and servants of the male proclaimers with Luke. Reasons: The evaluation of the Gospel of Luke, and especially the evaluation of the image of women therein, is currently being debated in exegesis, which is reflected in the draft text and the proposed amendment. The modified motion for amendment attempts to take this still unfinished debate into account.

(54) Behind this is the changed situation of those second-generation Christians who came from rural Palestine to the region of the cities in Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, and also gained a foothold in the urban Roman setting. The adaptation to the surrounding culture and the social structures applying there took its toll, especially on the women.

(55) The change in the role played by women becomes clear in the post-Pauline Pastoral Epistles (before 150 AD): Women are excluded from the public congregation and relegated into the realm of the home. The house churches, conceived along the lines of the Roman association, are led by the “elders” (*presbyteroi*). The “kyriarchy” takes its toll by motivating the exclusion of women. It however does not (yet) fully assert itself, since the Church is not led by a single man, but by a circle of men.

(56) Some scholars consider Paul’s prohibition of teaching for women in 1 Cor 14:34-36 not to be an original part of the Letter, but a later adaptation of the prohibition of teaching in 1 Timothy (1 Tim 2:11-15). In both cases, the prohibition of teaching is however justified not in theological but in purely sociological terms with a view to social customs. A Genesis exegesis that is questionable from today’s point of view is used in 1 Tim 2:12-14 in order to justify the subordination of women to men. Female deacons are only to be deployed in a social, charitable and gender-specific context (1 Tim 3:11).

(57) The dispute about widows in 1 Tim 5:3-16 shows particularly clearly from today’s perspective how great the fear was that an alternative understanding of the role of women might damage the reputation of the Christian congregations (1 Tim 5:14). Women who defied and resisted male dominance in society seem to have been more readily accepted in Pauline times. 1 Cor 7 indicates that even young women could live out their religiously-motivated ideal of celibacy and place their Christianity at the service of the proclamation with greater freedom. This opportunity was not given to women again until in the context of the ascetic monastic movement of late Antiquity. The establishment of celibacy as an accepted religious way of life for women can be seen as a significant emancipatory achievement of the early Church.

(58) Even if the ministry structures in the early congregations were not consolidated, and the development was not unilinear, the process of “institutionalisation” can be identified from an early stage. The more institutionalisation progressed, the more women took a back seat. With Paul, men and women alike who have charisms and functions are part of the congregation (1 Cor 12:28). Women are conceivable here. The Pastoral Epistles (before 150 AD), on the other hand, equate the charism of God with the grace of ordination. Both are conferred by the imposition of hands according to the Old Testament model (1 Tim 4:14). Women were excluded from such a ministry in the second Century at the latest. This also applies to the tripartite office of *episcopus*, *presbyteros* and *diaconos*, as well as to the moniscopate (where the congregation is led by a single bishop). These forms of leadership emerged in the post-New Testament period, and are later justified in theological terms by the Fathers of the Church.

### **3.6 Biblical models of the ministry: from interpreting history to shaping the present**

(59) Today’s church offices and ministries did not come into being all at once, nor did their development proceed in a straight line. Studies in social history, and more recently in gender studies, additionally show that the possibilities open to a woman to determine her own life were

largely dependent on her social and economic situation. This was already true in the early days of the Christian Church. Not every woman could leave everything behind and follow Jesus. Slave women could not hold a leadership position even in the Roman city churches. What the businesswoman and deaconess Phoebe could do in Cenchreae was probably not possible for the freed slave Junia in Rome, despite the fact that she was an apostle. This means that what we know about specific women and the possibilities open to them, as well as about the boundaries that were imposed on their participation in early Christian communities, is always also dependent on the concrete social ideas, and first and foremost on the prevailing role models for men and women to which the Christian minorities conformed. This is shown by the following example: When Paul or the later editor harshly condemns women to silence in the church assembly (1 Cor 14:33-36), he does so on the grounds of it not being customary for women to speak publicly in the assemblies of the churches. He however presupposes that they play an active role in church services (1 Cor 11:2-16). 1 Corinthians would therefore justify women preaching in worship, but exclude them altogether from playing a role as parish councillors, or from assuming leading offices in the Church.

(60) The fact that social structures in Antiquity largely determined gender roles must make us very cautious today when it comes to understanding Biblical statements about women as fundamentally valid determinations. The Church never considered Herself obliged to unquestioningly uphold the norms of the Ancient pagan environment; on the contrary, in the spirit of the Gospel, She has challenged them forcefully in Her history and struggled against them, at times with great missionary effort. The proclamation of the Gospel is hindered today by the perception that the genders are not treated equally in the Church, and the Christian message is thus judged to be untrustworthy.

(61) It might make more sense to rediscover the Pauline doctrine of charisms and apply it to today's bearers of spiritual gifts in the Church. For Paul, the Church (*ecclesia*) is - in Christological terms - the people of God gathered in Christ, and - in pneumatological terms - the body of Christ joined together by the Spirit and enlivened with His gifts (1 Cor 12). The vision of a Christian community of people in which ethnicity, social status or gender (neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free person, no male and female) is no longer significant, but the new existence as a human being baptised into Christ (Gal 3:28), that is a return to the originally good Creation, has not been brought to fruition up to the present day. Paul is already quoting here traditional material that was left to him, at first independently of the question of offices. But he states the principle in line with which the Church can direct Her authority to reshape offices in the present situation, or to create new offices out of Her faith in the mission of the Risen Lord.

### **3.7 Mary, friend of God, sister in the faith and archetype (*typus*) of the Church**

(62) A woman in the Bible whose impact on the Church is theologically and spiritually inexhaustible is Mary, the mother of Jesus. We know little more about her in historical terms other than her name and that her hometown was Nazareth. Perceptions of women and of the Church down through the centuries have been inspired by Mary. As a friend of God, sister in the faith, seat

of wisdom and archetype (*typus*) of the Church<sup>4</sup>, she especially stands today for a fraternal Church, an amical community of the genders in a liberating space of grace. The singer of the Magnificat praises humility and a willingness to serve. She calls herself the “handmaid” or “slave” of God, thus conveying a prophetic title of honour on herself (cf. Moses as a “servant” or “slave” of God in Deut 34:5). She places herself in the long tradition of Biblical women (Miriam, Deborah, Judith, Esther and many more) who find strength in trusting God, who defy gender stereotypes, and sing of God’s acts putting an end to unjust power relationships as the angel Gabriel addressed her (Mary) and not the man as before, when he announced to Zechariah the birth of John the Baptist through his wife Elizabeth (Lk 1:5-38).

(63) The Biblical foundation presented here, while taking into account the patriarchal context of origin and interpretation, reveals considerable potential for equality between man and woman, as well as the common mission of the faithful for the proclamation of the Gospel, regardless of their gender.

(64) The Good News of Jesus centred on the announcement of the coming rule of God (Mk 1:15). The announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand was targeted at everyone. The Gospels report that Jesus had a multitude of encounters with women. It is evident in all the stories that Jesus has a brotherly, affirming attitude towards women. He speaks to them, he heals them, He teaches them as His disciples; He protects them from social injustice and religious discrimination.

(65) In all the Easter stories that the Gospels tell of the empty tomb, it is women who are the first witnesses to the resurrection. They, unlike most of the disciples, persevered at the cross and dare to go to the tomb, they receive the revelation of the victory over death and they are entrusted with proclaiming the Easter message.

(66) Charismatic equality in the Pauline congregations includes women. Women naturally have a share in the spiritual gifts, all of which are to be contributed towards building up the congregation. The missionary work of early Christianity did not therefore dispense with the services of women. In fact, they devoted their time, energy and indeed their whole lives to spreading the Gospel. They were active in the early Christian communities in preaching, in pastoral care, in education, and in leadership.

#### **4. Reflections in the history of tradition**

(67) Women have played a leading, creative role in Christian communities through all the eras in the history of Christianity. Countless women, often unnamed because tradition has been authorised by men, have shaped and spiritually enriched the Church, even though they were excluded from leadership functions and from ordained ministry from the 2nd Century onwards. The Church in the historical process is inconceivable without women praying, women acting as pastors, charity workers, teachers of theology, missionaries and financial supporters. In this process, women have created and fought again and again for free spaces in the thoroughly patriarchal societies in which, in addition to the serving and receptive role to assigned them, they have also exercised leadership functions in the Church in isolated cases. Great importance

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 53; 63.

was and is attached to the women's orders in particular. Abbesses have exercised their office with spiritual authority in the communities that they led since early Christian times. Their actions are also significant at the level of ecclesiastical jurisprudence; they are qualified in terms of church law. Women's orders still exert a major influence on the spiritual constitution of society today. The presentation of the history of Christianity from the point of view of women is therefore not a narration of a series of exceptional, prominent female figures, but consists of recalling the history of the continuous contribution that women have made to the life of the Church. This needs to be acknowledged and appreciated.

#### 4.1 Developments in the Patristic and Scholastic periods

(68) The configuration of the offices is based on cultural patterns of Roman society in which women could not give testimony or sign contracts, in which the husband or a relative was a woman's "guardian". The newly-forming sacramental offices of leadership - in the triad of bishop, presbyterate and diaconate - were therefore reserved for men. The presbyters were a body of experienced men who advised the bishop and who then, as the bishoprics grew ever larger, were able to preside over the Eucharist in the worshipping communities. Deaconesses were responsible for the ministry to the poor, widows and orphans. The dogmatic-theological significance of the offices held by women in the early Church and into the Middle Ages is a matter of controversy today. The office of deaconess is confirmed in the Western Church and into the early Middle Ages. The lines of argumentation regarding the exclusion of women from sacramental office then become tied up in scholastic theology with the question of whether women in office can represent Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist, and were also combined with a conviction that became deeply embedded in Western culture, namely that the female gender was inferior.

(69) Women were active in various ministries and offices in the Church in the first millennium. Widows and virgins who were in community ministry received an ordination which lent special expression to their following of Christ. Deaconesses were ordained in a similar way to deacons. The Syriac church order of the "*Didascalia apostolorum*", presented in the year 220, speaks of a ministry of deacons for women which is responsible for caring for women in the congregation, for services to the sick, for baptismal catechesis, and for the baptismal anointing of women. The title of "deaconess" is used for the first time in the 4th Century at the Council of Nicea (325), and the Council of Chalcedon (451) testifies in the 5th Century that women were being ordained as deacons. It sets 40 as the minimum age for deaconesses; there are provisions for deaconesses to marry, and there is talk of ordination with the laying on of hands and prayer. There is evidence of the ordination of women in the Western tradition up to the 12th Century. Indications of the ordination of women can in fact be found even longer in the Eastern Church and in the Orthodox tradition. The great cathedral churches of Antiquity had not only many deacons working there, but also a number of deaconesses. The best-known deaconesses of Antiquity include Olympias in Constantinople, Kelerina, Romana and Pelagia in Antioch, and Radegundis, the wife of the Frankish King Clothar, who left the court, was ordained as a "*diac-ona*", and lived in Poitiers.



(70) An explicit reflection on the exclusion of women from sacramental office began in scholastic theology and the study of canon law in the mid-13th Century. Aristotelian anthropology was adopted, and women were subordinated to men by their very nature and declared unsuitable for the *ordo*. Sacramental ordination, it is pointed out here, is ruled out by divine law, the central argument being the “natural likeness” between the sacramental symbol (involving the recipient) and that is signified by the sacrament. This means that the male Christ can only be represented by a male priest. According to Bonaventure in his Commentary on the Sentences, the likeness due to creation is a prerequisite for the coming into being of the sacrament, even though the fullness of the sacrament is certainly always achieved by being instituted by Christ. Man and woman stand for “God and the soul”, “Christ and the Church”, the “higher and lower part of reason” (Bonaventure, 4 Sent. d. 25, a. 2, q. 1 c. (IV, 650a-b). Here, the man always stands for the higher, stronger, divine part, and the woman for the lower, weaker, creaturely part; it is in precisely this sense that she is a “*mas occasionatus*”, a “misbegotten male”, as Thomas Aquinas writes (STh I, q. 92, a. 1). According to the argumentation, this is precisely what it means that woman is unable to exercise the priestly representation of Christ because she is said to lack qualifications on the level of “natural likeness”: namely, the male gender, and thus not to be able to take the place of the bridegroom in the conjugal union, which is understood as analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

(71) A history of guilt that has rarely been considered in the past concerns the question of the debasement of women in the context of the justification of compulsory celibacy for clerics in the framework of the reform of the Church that took place in the 11th Century. Women priests were regarded as prostitutes and concubines, as a source of sin and a cause of undoing for pastors. The Second Lateran Council (1139 AD) condemned the intercourse of higher-order clerics with women as fornication and impurity, and this led to them losing their office. Clerics were therefore ordered to separate from their wives and children. The continence of the priest was justified, among other things, by the notion that one could not touch the body of Christ during the Eucharist and, around the same time, touch a “whore’s body”, namely that of a woman. The demand for the cultic purity of the clergy - in connection with misogynistic statements in the biblical texts and the patristic tradition - led to women being disqualified as objects of sinful desire.

(72) As early as in the late scholastic period, John Duns Scotus and Durandus changed the argumentation with regard to the exclusion of women from ordained ministry. An argument was introduced that referred to a corresponding order of Christ: The restriction of ordination to men is derived from the conferral of consecration authority at the Lord’s Supper, and of the authority to absolve in connection with the bestowal of the Spirit by the Risen Lord (John 20:19-23). This is the line of reasoning that is taken up in the ecclesial tradition, through to “*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*” (1994). This ecclesiastical argumentation is undermined in the mystical traditions, for instance in texts by Gertrude of Helfta or Mechthild of Magdeburg, by Julian of Norwich, by Teresa of Avila, Thérèse de Lisieux or Edith Stein, and also in the practice of the Church - in the catechesis, and in educational and missionary work, but also in liturgical practices in convents and various forms of aesthetic expression such as book illumination - there is a variety of other testimonies that can be discovered to women’s struggle to participate more fully in the Church according to their vocation. But these testimonies have remained invisible for centuries.

## 4.2 Women's diaconate in the Orthodox Church

(73) Deaconesses have been ordained in various Orthodox Churches in recent years. For example, Patriarch Theodoros II in the Democratic Republic of Congo ordained a woman as a “missionary deaconess” during a service held in Kolwezi in February 2017, and the Patriarch of Jerusalem also ordained a woman as a deaconess. These ordinations follow on from the ordination of deaconesses in the early Church and in Orthodox tradition, and this practice went on into the late Byzantine era. The institution of the women's diaconate was however never abolished by a synodal resolution.

(74) A debate on the restoration of women's diaconate has been going on in the Orthodox Churches since the 1980s: After the inter-Orthodox symposium that was held in Boston (1985), the Ecumenical Patriarchate convened a Pan-Orthodox Conference in Rhodes in 1988 on the topic of the place of the woman in the Orthodox Church and the question of the ordination of women. It was emphasised here that the women's diaconate should be revived. Although it had never been altogether abandoned, it was in danger of being forgotten. The studies of the Orthodox theologian Evangelos Theodorou and many others make it clear that the texts of the early Church do not distinguish between men and women with regard to the quality of ordination, and that there is also no gender-specific distinction between a higher or a lower level of ordination, or between a sacrament and a sacramental object. The ordination forms contain the epiclesis, and in the prayer of ordination the reference to divine grace, which explicitly indicates sacramental ordination. The diaconate, and this includes the women's diaconate, belongs in the old Church, and in the Orthodox theological interpretation of these ordination forms, to the “higher ordo”, like the bishop and presbyter.

(75) Deaconesses in the Orthodox Churches worked in the fields of liturgy, pastoral care, catechesis, education, mission and care especially for sick, grieving, needy women, for Christian and non-Christian women. They were also responsible for the virgins and widows within the Church, and it fell to them to ensure order and decency during the church service itself. Above all, as the “Apostolic Constitutions” make clear, they also assisted in the administration of baptism; they administered the Eucharist to sick women who were unable to travel to the house of God, and they assisted in the service of the burial of women. The ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church will be helpful with regard to the establishment of the women's diaconate, even though the Orthodox Church rejects the ordination of women to the priestly ministry.

## 4.3 Positioning in the Reformation tradition

(76) In its plurality, the Reformation opened up new possibilities for women to take part in church life, especially in its early phase. The emphasis placed on the priesthood of all the faithful in the Reformation movements enabled women to recognise their opportunity to express themselves publicly in theological terms, to transcend their traditional roles, and to live out their vocations in new ministries within the Church.

(77) Nevertheless, the Reformation did not lead in a straight line to the ordination of women, or even consistently pave the way for it. The admission of women to pastoral and ordained ministry is, in the Churches of the Reformation, rather a development of modern times, especially of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Before this time, women in Protestant Churches were

given new and in some cases leading functions, especially in Protestant religious movements (including pietism, puritanism, revivalism and Free Church denominations), which attached importance to the personal faith of the individual and to the charismatic equality of the faithful, and which primarily included and emphasised the ministry of proclamation.

(78) The equal service of women in pastoral ministry in the Protestant regional churches was able to assert itself via several stages of underprivileged service relationships in periods of time that varied regionally in the second half of the 20th Century, but it was not until the mid-1970s that the equality of women in pastoral ministry was anchored and regulated by church law. The path frequently led via an “office *sui generis*”, or a women’s ministry (including parish assistant or vicar), whereby the difference *vis-à-vis* the male minister was distinctly underlined due to the gender-specific attributions. Similar processes also led to the ordained ministry of women being recognised in some Free Churches from the 1970s onwards. The decision of the General Synod of the Church of England in 1992 to admit women as priests received particular attention in ecumenical circles. The unrestricted ordination of women to the apostolic ministry in the Church took place in the Old Catholic Church in 1994 via the introduction of the diaconate.

(79) An often gradual process can be observed in all Churches which ultimately decided to ordain women and commission them in all ecclesiastical offices and ministries, whereby various ecclesiastical “women’s offices” were created in order to be able to appoint women to tasks within the Church. These encompassed the entire spectrum of the spiritual office, but without granting women complete equality. The recognition of women in ecclesiastical offices prevailed especially in those Churches where the proclamation mandate of women was taken seriously and fulfilled, or where a gift-orientated equality of rights was distinguished. A pneumatological accentuation of the theology of ministry played a decisive role in this process. This is certainly an ecumenical point of contact, including if gender equality is being struggled for to the present day in the Churches of the Reformation in a similar way as in different regions of the Roman Catholic Church. The worldwide Anglican Communion has been put to the test in view of the introduction of the ordination of women.

#### 4.4 Developments in modern times

(80) Insights were gained during the Reformation in the 16th Century on the basis of the Biblical testimonies which found their way into the texts of the Council of Trent and were reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council. These developments are of profound significance when it comes to preparing to answer the question of whether women are also called to sacramental ministry, a question which needs to be discussed with theological expertise.

(81) The common priesthood founded in baptism and confirmation forms the theological foundation for any further consideration of the specificity of the sacramental ministry<sup>5</sup>. The “ministerial priesthood” and the “common priesthood” “differ from one another in essence and not only in degree”<sup>6</sup>. The most recent Council wished to express with this statement that there is a categorial and not merely an incremental difference in the definition of the ministry of those who are baptised, and that of the sacramentally ordained: In receiving the sacrament of priestly

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

ordination and therein representing Jesus Christ, ordained persons have a different ministry, they minister to the ministries that as such are entrusted to all who are baptised. They discover and strengthen the charisms; they coordinate individual areas of the ministry; they exhort to work together with one accord in the one good work. Service to the ministries requires in a special way the ability to communicate, the ability to differentiate, and insight into the foundations of Christian existence. Both women and men have such talents. The proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace is the primary task to be performed in all acts of the Church. Unlike in earlier times when jurisdictional tasks were paramount, the Second Vatican Council has determined it to be the primary task of bishops to ensure that the Gospel is proclaimed in all places.<sup>7</sup> In view of this challenge, the question arises as to why bishops do not seize all the opportunities presented to them to also entrust women who have acquired professional expertise and are ready to proclaim the Gospel on behalf of the Church, with the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel on an equal footing with men. The increased employment of women in pastoral ministry, made possible by the establishment of the professions of pastoral and parish workers over the last 100 years in the German-speaking world, also makes ambivalences obvious. With the same training and competence, the lack of equal rights to ordained ministry is a constant point of conflict. At the same time, there is a wealth of practical theological experience which must be taken into account.

(82) The Second Vatican Council paid great attention to the question of the order of ministries and offices. Concern for the diaconal acts of the Church was an important matter here. The establishment of the "permanent diaconate" in the period after the Second Vatican Council can be seen as the fulfilment of a promise made by the Council to pay greater attention to this dimension of ecclesial action. This is also being called for in the local churches of the South - such as the Latin American Churches - as was the case recently at the Amazon Synod (2019) and the Ecclesial Assembly (2021). Even before the Council's decision, men prepared themselves for their activities. Women are also doing this today, in the hope of a reception of the theological findings on the subject.

## 5. Systematic-theological aspects

(83) Controversial views are also put forward in the worldwide expert discussions on the question of the possibility of (also) women participating in the sacramental ministry, and these have to do with fundamental questions of theology which are taken up below: What are the ways of discerning the revealed will of God? What is the difference between a sacramental ministry and other forms of sending out and commissioning people who are called by God? What image of the Church constitutes the guiding principle in all the considerations, and how are the Church's doctrinal decisions, which claim a high degree of binding force, to be considered in the discussion?

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 25; Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus*, 12; Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church *Ad gentes*, 30.

## 5.1 Theology-of-the-revelation contexts

(84) The question of the possibility of women also taking part in the three forms of the one sacramental office was already controversially discussed during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), but increasingly in the systematic-theological reflection that followed. This also has to do with developments in ecumenism. For example, as described above, women were ordained as pastors in the Protestant Churches from the 1950s onwards. Theological discussions on the ordination of women began in the Anglican Churches in the 1960s. The General Synod of the Church of England decided in 1992 to admit women as priests. There were parallel developments in the Old Catholic Church. An effective motivating factor in these developments was certainly the new perception of the role of women in society. The theological debate always centred on the concern for the contemporary proclamation of the Gospel.

(85) Two magisterial letters were presented in this temporal context on the binding force of which agreement has still not been reached in the theological disputes. On 22 May 1994, Pope John Paul II published *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* on the ordination of priests reserved for men only, referring to the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Inter Insigniores* on the admission of women to priestly ordination of 15 October 1976.<sup>8</sup> John Paul II wrote in 1994: “Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”<sup>9</sup> John Paul II refers here to the authority of the Church, and to the canonical provision that a “baptised male alone receives sacred ordination validly” (Can. 1024/CIC 1983): The Church “has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord’s way of acting in choosing the twelve men whom he made the foundation of his Church (cf. Rv 21:14)”<sup>10</sup>, and these [men] “did not in fact receive only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church; rather they were specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself”<sup>11</sup>. Pope Francis refers in his statements on this question to the binding decision of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, and emphasises with regard to the question of the ordination of women that “the door is closed”.

(86) The declaration *Inter Insigniores* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is thereby included, thus affirming a figure of discussion in the magisterial argumentation which draws on traditional gender anthropology. In this perspective, the representation of Christ in the sacramental ministry is only possible through men: Christ has entrusted acting “*in persona Christi*”, in other words the administration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, exclusively to the apostles - to men. Pope Francis puts it as follows in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*: “Jesus Christ appears as the Spouse of the community that celebrates the Eucharist through the figure of a man who presides as a sign of the one Priest”<sup>12</sup> (*Querida Amazonia* 101).

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<sup>8</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood *Inter Signiores* (October 15, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the People of God and to All Persons of Good Will *Querida Amazonia* (February 2, 2020), 101.

The representation of Christ in the sacramental ministry is understood in this sense as a counterpart to the Church, which is “feminine”. On the one hand, it is forgotten here that “*in persona Christi*” refers to the role, and not to the human person as is understood in the Modern sense. On the other hand, images are called to mind here that have been considered since the time of the Fathers: The Church is the Bride, according to the image from Ephesians, who is joined to the Bridegroom, Christ, in a loving relationship (cf. Eph 5:21-32).

(87) One problem is that insufficient attention is paid to the metaphoric nature of these texts, and that unilinear gender-specific attributions are carried out - Christ is male, the Church is female -, as well as that mystical traditions which have repeatedly broken with these unilinear attributions are not considered here.

(88) The metaphor of bride and bridegroom that is used when arguing for the exclusion of women from ordained ministry is furthermore problematic for another reason: The original Biblical context is the vivid inclusion of the question of faith in the one God who promised Himself in love to the people of Israel. The imagery is connected to the foundation of the monotheistic confession. God acts towards Israel like a jealous bridegroom to whom the bride is unfaithful, but God nevertheless remains merciful (cf. Hos 2). What might this mean in a theological context regarding the ministry? The Church as a bride - both men and women - is sinful, and does not deserve the love of the Bridegroom God on the basis of Her own works. The aforementioned magisterial documents, and the affirmation of their binding force also by Pope Francis, make it clear that, from a magisterial perspective, the structure of the ministries - including their representations with gender connotations - is grounded in revelation itself, in the will of God. The question of God's will with regard to the Church in its institutional form is to be answered against the background of the revelation-theological foundations of Vatican II and thus in the interaction of the various instances of witnessing to the faith (see orientation text).

(89) The current theological debates concerning women's access to the sacramental ministry take up this Christological-soteriological and eschatological perspective of the Biblical texts, and tie in with the new theology of revelationist foundations of the Second Vatican Council. “In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will”<sup>13</sup>, “out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends”<sup>14</sup>, and “man commits his whole self freely to God”<sup>15</sup>, borne by the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit. The question as to the representation of Jesus Christ is embedded in this fundamental theology of revelationist communicative structure, as presented in the Council texts. God's revelation therefore takes place not primarily through “instruction”, through an externally-binding instruction to hold statements to be true, but through the exchange of a divine promise and a human response in a personal event of faith and trust.

(90) In this sense, the ministry is at the service of evangelisation, to make salvation symbolic in secular reality, and yet “real”; to make it possible to experience it in physical and spiritual reality. Jesus Christ is “represented” in this sacramental manner in the ministry, so that spaces for the experience of salvation are opened up to the whole people of God, and the people of

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<sup>13</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei verbum* (November 18, 1965), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

God themselves can live up to the aspiration of proclaiming the Gospel and growing in communion with God and with one another. This “representation” grows out of the continuous communication of God with man, and of the communication of the whole people of God with God. This means: out of the dynamics of what faith - especially also in the sense of the shared faith of the community of the Church - means: to “turn back” to God anew each time, and thus also to place structures of ministry in a continuous process of renewal towards God.

(91) The Second Vatican Council understands the process of revelation as a self-revelation of God: “In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4).”<sup>16</sup> God’s revelation serves the salvation of humanity. God’s revelation is a gift and a promise of a redeemed life. God promises His presence in faithfulness. Jesus Christ is the lasting image of the invisible God in time and history. God’s essence is neither female nor male. God redeemed Creation through His incarnation: God enters into the lowliness of earthly time and becomes man. Jesus Christ remains “obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). The idea of God’s kenosis - “debasement” through God’s self-abasement - was given very high attention in early church Christology and soteriology. God takes on the life of a human being in order to permit the human being to partake of divine life. Those who consider the undisputed biological gender of Jesus as a man to be significant in this theological context run the risk of questioning the redemption of woman by God, since only those whom God has accepted according to human nature are redeemed.

(92) A distinction needs to be made, with regard to the question of how God’s revelation takes place through the life and workings of Jesus Christ, between the actions of the earthly Jesus, which (also) took place under the auspices of His human will and consciousness, and the post-Easter and post-Pentecostal interpretation of the entire life that He led. It is considered common knowledge in theological research today that Jesus knew that He was being sent out to His people Israel during his lifetime. The founding of the post-Easter Church in Her institutional structure is an event in the Holy Spirit, in connection with Jesus’ symbolic acts, which remained significant in the memory. One of these symbolic acts is the call to fellowship with Jesus, which both women and men experienced. Special authority was assigned in the post-Easter period to those persons who had encountered the Risen Christ - an event that established the apostolic ministry as a witness to the living Christ. Mary Magdalene also participates in this form of apostolate (cf. John 20:11-18). Mary, the mother of Jesus, is found in the events of Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1-4); this stands for a Church that is fraternal from the beginning. As a great believer and a prophetic as well as a courageous woman (cf. the Magnificat Lk 1:46-55), Mary becomes the “*typus*” of the Church, an example for all the faithful - regardless of gender.

(93) None of the passages in the Bible can be considered by itself as an indication of God’s will for the institutional form that the Church is to take. Ministries and offices related to the respective time have developed in a complex historical process, and these should always guarantee one thing: to serve the proclamation and the celebration of the Easter faith and to make visible the risen Lord Jesus Christ present in His Church. Different concepts of ministries and

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<sup>16</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum*, 2.

offices were already handed down within the Biblical canon: Responsibility is assumed in the Pauline congregations by those who contribute a charism for the building up of the congregation; offices are arranged later on in the interest of preserving the apostolic tradition. All forms of ministries and offices are lastingly valid. The question arises anew in every age as to which form of ecclesial ministry and service best serves the proclamation of the Easter Gospel.

## 5.2 Sacramental-theological contexts

(94) The central mission of the Church is evangelisation, and the ministry is to be understood in terms of the apostolic mission. According to the guiding perspective of *Lumen Gentium* in the chapter on the episcopate, the ministry is to present and represent Jesus Christ in such a way that the people of God can live up to the aspiration of proclaiming the Gospel, and growing the communion with God and with one another<sup>17</sup>. This overcomes a sacerdotal-cultic understanding of ministry which led to a new interpretation of the priesthood in late Antiquity and scholasticism, where the latter established its most important task, consisting in the offering of the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

(95) The Second Vatican Council - also drawing on traditions of the early Church - assumes a multiplicity of “*ministeria*”, that is ministries, so that the Church can fulfil Her task of evangelisation. Jesus Christ has instituted “a variety of ministries”<sup>18</sup>, and all of them are grounded in the ministry of salvation to which the Church is committed in following Jesus Christ. Institution by Christ legitimises the authority of the “*ministeria*”, and it is on this that the authority and sacramental quality given with the office are founded. The office is always an office here in service “for others”; sacramentality is to be understood in this sense in soteriological-pastoral terms. To exercise a sacramental ministry is a “*ministerium*” which on the one hand is to be seen “in” the Church, and on the other hand, through being called by Jesus Christ, in “relativity” to the People of God. The “*ministerium*” is a service that cannot be primarily determined by the “offering of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ” in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is, rather, about opening up the space from the fresh conversion to Jesus Christ and in the relationship with the congregation and with the praying congregation, so that the mystery of redemption, which God has revealed in Jesus Christ, can take place anew. The representation of Jesus Christ, which accrues to the priest, is a relational act in the celebration of the Eucharist. Acting “*in persona Christi*” is related to the community of the faithful so that they can grow more and more into the mystery of God for which Jesus Christ stands, and which has been absorbed in His whole life, His death and His resurrection. Thus, the representation of Jesus Christ is to be understood in a broader sense, corresponding to the many “*ministeria*” and to their orientation towards the serving Christ (cf. Mt 20:26; 25; John 13:1-15) of which the Council speaks. It is precisely the representation of Christ in the diaconal ministry that will contribute to a renewal of ecclesiology and theology of ministry in the service of a diaconal Church. Jesus Christ is represented by those who take care of the poorest of the poor (cf. Mt 25:31-46), who go to the fringes, who permit themselves to be consumed by the need of their fellow beings. People can

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



be trusted to perceive in the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ meets them when a person - regardless of gender - listens to them, comforts them, lifts them up, heals them, and guides them in life.

(96) The Second Vatican Council laid the foundations for the renewal of the theology of ministry and sacraments. These constitute the foundation for invalidating magisterial argumentation figures with regard to the ordination of women, which have moved to the centre in recent years and which link questions of sacramental and ministerial theology with gender anthropology which is also increasingly contentious. The decisive factor here is in particular the Spirit-worked presence of the risen Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist.

(97) The question accordingly arises as to the theological meaning of the bride-bridegroom metaphor laid down in the Old Testament. In essence, this metaphor serves the concern of monotheism and of the special relationship between YHWH and Israel: that Israel has only one God, just as the bride and bridegroom are exclusive to one another. Accordingly, the Christian-adapted bride-bridegroom metaphor was never unambiguously attributed to the respective genders, but has also been attributed in exactly the opposite direction: For example, in speaking of the "*anima ecclesiastica*" (Origenes, Bernard of Clairvaux); from here, the symbolism has a tradition in mysticism. It however appears questionable - and even dangerous - to assign the typological speech of the bridegroom and the bride in the sense of roles to consecrated ministers and lay people in the sacramental acts: For the accounts of no small number of victims of sexual violence and spiritual abuse in the sphere of the Church (especially girls and women) also document that this gender typology in particular has become a gateway for abuse.

(98) Even beyond this bride-bridegroom metaphor, an interpretation of the representation of Christ that refers to the natural gender of a minister is difficult to bear for people who have experienced sexualised violence at the hands of priests. The question arises as to whether it should really be the fact that the minister is a man, his physical body, that qualifies him to adequately represent Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. Any spiritual glorification of the difference between the genders for the purpose of role assignments within the Church must be critically questioned in a highly fundamental sense, especially in the context of the theology of ministry. One should therefore recall here the "presence of strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed and acted as missionaries"<sup>19</sup>. According to the unanimous testimony of the Church's traditional teaching, the conferring of baptism is one of the apostolic tasks and powers in the same way as consecration in the Eucharist. If the possibility of the representation of Christ in the conferring of baptism is not bound to the male gender, then why should this be so when it comes to presiding over the Eucharist?

### **5.3 Ecclesiological contexts: on the binding nature of the Church's doctrinal decisions**

(99) All theological knowledge of people is subject to fallibility. God's Spirit alone preserves the Church in truth. It is therefore important above all to initiate a common search movement in a spiritual process in a communicative exchange. There is controversy in theological research concerning the extent to which the magisterial statements are binding (as well as about these

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 99.

themselves) in terms of the question of the ordination of women to sacramental ministries and offices in the Church. The arguments need to be re-examined, and evaluated according to criteria that are comprehensible from an argumentative point of view. The fundamental issue of the development of dogma must be taken into account in this process. In addition, scholarly theology raises the question of what form of language act applies to specific magisterial texts. An intensive effort needs to be undertaken in order to distinguish the criteria to be applied when determining the extent to which the Church's doctrinal statements are binding.

(100) The Roman Catholic doctrinal tradition comprises four forms of statement to which the attribute of infallibility (freedom from error) is to be assigned: an explicit doctrinal opinion of the Bishop of Rome, with an explicit reference to his authority ("*ex cathedra*" decision), the doctrinal decisions of an ecumenical council of all bishops, the concurring doctrinal opinion of the Body of Bishops worldwide<sup>20</sup>, and the doctrinal opinion of the entire body of the faithful<sup>21</sup>. The question arises with regard to the qualification of the present doctrinal texts in terms of their binding nature as to whether the announcement of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), which has gone unchallenged by the bishops, fulfils the criteria of the third form. At the same time, the question arises as to what is signified if individual bishops today ultimately regard the question as open-ended, and call for more in-depth argumentation in accordance with theological research. John Paul II also refers in his remarks to the considerations that it is "*definitive tenendam*" ("to be preserved as definitive"), which, although said to not be clearly evident from the revelation in Scripture, is said to be necessary for the preservation of the Biblical revelation. This view is controversial in theological literature. Is it really the case that the core of the Christian message, namely the proclamation of the Easter faith, can only be preserved if women are excluded from this office? Or is it not rather the case that women perform precisely this ministry in the Easter stories, and testify to Jesus Christ as a living presence?

(101) A worldwide joint theological effort is needed in order to eliminate, as far as possible, the discrepancy that seems obvious to many theologians, men and women alike, between the assertion of the conviction that the formulated doctrines are final and binding, and the weakness of theological argumentation perceived by many theologians and already addressed in specialist contributions for decades. No church teaching will be able to prove sustainable and relevant to action in the long run, that is questioned or rejected altogether by an ever-increasing number of believers endowed with the sense of faith, and which also cannot be convincingly justified theologically-scientifically and in terms of biblical theology.

#### 5.4 Hermeneutical insights in worldwide Christian ecumenism

(102) The ecumenical context of the issue must also be considered when searching for credibility. In national, European and worldwide dialogues, the Roman Catholic Church always affirms Her willingness to continue searching for the visible unity of the Church. This cannot be justified if there is not also a professional exchange in theological discussions about the arguments that led to a different position being adopted concerning the question of women (also) partaking of the apostolate, in official responsibility through ordination.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

(103) According to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, willingness to repent is constitutive for ecumenical cooperation, and connected with this the insight into the Churches' continuous need for reform and their inner dependence on the complementary gifts and values of the other Churches<sup>22</sup>. The requirements of the Decree on Ecumenism are accordingly realised in the spiritually-based reciprocity of the different Christian traditions. It is therefore important to include the ecumenical perspective in all questions related to the Church's teaching and practice, and to be ready for a process of learning and reform.

(104) What does the ecumenical movement mean for the participation of women in all ecclesial offices in the Roman Catholic Church, when numerous ecumenical partners who are to be taken seriously in terms of their history, values and tradition have decided in recent decades to ordain women? Ecumenical dialogue, which is seen as essential to the nature of the Church cannot disregard this fact and these developments.

(105) Demands for a just, fraternal community of women and men in the Churches have been formulated and repeatedly addressed, especially in the ecumenical context. Women are to be empowered to challenge oppressive structures in society and in the Churches. The recognition of the essential contribution made by women in Churches with the aim of equal co-responsibility and co-creation should be emphasised here.

(106) The introduction of women's ordination in many Churches has triggered ecumenical processes. This was also carried out with the inclusion of new insights from feminist theology and exegesis.

### **5.5 Gender equality in the universal Church context**

(107) What is seen in the Roman Catholic Church as the God-given order of the genders was and is - more so than in society as a whole - to a large extent culturally and historically determined by the respective prevailing surrounding culture, and especially its political power dynamics.

(108) This can also be determined from the perspective of the "universal Church", which is to be seen as a "local church" in the community of many "local churches". As such, She is historically and currently characterised by a great lack of simultaneity in the different global contexts. Accelerating globalisation means that intercultural dynamics, the postcolonial debate, the question of justice, and the poverty gap, pose great challenges to the local churches. Accordingly, a wide variety of answers can be found to the question of gender equality in church contexts. It is to be noted, for example, that - on the one hand - women worldwide have made and continue to make an essential contribution to the transmission of the Gospel, but on the other hand have also been made invisible in history and in the present, and that they have experienced violence and continue to do so. Especially in view of this observation the local churches in Germany therefore bear the responsibility for keeping the question of women in church offices part of the discussion, also from the point of view of gender equality.

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<sup>22</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), 7.

(109) The Church's teaching traditionally describes the relationship between the genders from the position of complementarity, and uses this to also justify excluding women from the sacramental ministry. Church teaching even today defines the "essence of woman" with self-referential reference to tradition. Biblical texts are favoured that justify the "natural" destiny and subordination of women, without seeing the imbalance this creates, which leads to injustice and unfairness. This also excludes all that is necessary for Christians to be able to respond freely to their vocation: Freedom from relationships and social structures, freedom from human power and pressure, freedom of conscience, self-determination, the chance to (critically) discern one's own vocation. The Second Vatican Council, by contrast, states that "the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition", and that "every type of discrimination" is to be eradicated<sup>23</sup>. There is thus a reason and a necessity to bring difference and equality to bear in the discourse on gender relations, including in the theological discourse, and to value and recognise all the charisms and vocations given by God, regardless of an individual's gender.

## 5.6 The experience of the vocation of women to the ministry

(110) No small number of women feel called by God to participate in sacramental ministries and offices. Much noted women in the history of the Church have reflected on the possible vocation also of women to the priestly ministry - among them Theresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux and Edith Stein. For generations, many women have known that they were called by God to be deaconesses or priestesses. This inner knowledge is countered by the outer experience that these women feel that their vocation is not taken sufficiently seriously by the Church and Her ministers, and that they are sometimes even disregarded. They perceive the restriction of the life and vocations available to them, as ordered by the Church's teaching, as an injustice, as discriminatory, and as constituting marginalisation.

(111) No one is to judge the experience of an existential encounter with God. Vocation is a dialogical occurrence that is characterised by listening and being listened to - both in the relationship between God and humankind, and also within the Church, which perceives those who experience the calling. Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Christifideles Laici* (1988) emphasises the importance of the different charisms as gifts of the Holy Spirit. Charisms should be received with gratitude in the Church, but it was also necessary to distinguish between them: "Judgment as to their (charisms) genuineness and proper use belongs to those who preside over the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good."<sup>24</sup> Vocations for church ministries are not a private matter, but must always be reviewed by the Church in an appropriate manner. The methods and criteria for reviewing vocations must be transparent and constantly adapted to new circumstances, knowledge and experience. Fundamental questions arise from the perspective of gender equality which apply in equal measure to the vocation of all people: According to which criteria is a vocational experience of men and women to be examined? Is it taken

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<sup>23</sup> Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World *Christifideles Laici* (December 30, 1988), 24.

seriously that women perceive themselves as addressed and called by God? Is their inclination, their inner readiness for a form of discipleship that suits them listened to and valued?

(112) In future, it should no longer be gender that decides on the allocation of ministries, but the vocation, abilities and skills that serve the proclamation of the Gospel in our time. Only in this way will the full potential of vocations and charisms for the people of God, that is the Church, be exhausted.

### **5.7 Representation of Christ and renewal of the theology of ministry on the paths of the poor Jesus**

(113) The controversial conversation about the question of women in ministries and offices in the Church is not a structural question pure and simple; it is not a matter of “functionalising” the ministry, according to the concern expressed by Pope Francis<sup>25</sup>. The question of women in sacramental ministry is about more: a renewed understanding of what the Church is, and a more profound approach to sacramentality, including from an ecumenical perspective. It is about a realisation of a process of conversion: to re-align oneself with what happened on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The institutional configuration of the Church must be orientated first and foremost to this process of conversion. A fundamental renewal of the theology of ministry - in the service of the diaconal Church - will be decisive for the future. It will be a matter of understanding the mystery of faith from the profound nature of the mystery of renewal, which took place in Jesus Christ in His many encounters on the roads of Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem, and which means salvation, becoming whole and living life to the full for all. The representation of Christ “takes place” through the experience of salvation and in depth through experiencing the Eucharist, to which however all ways of following Jesus Christ are related, and where the poor Jesus<sup>26</sup> is sacramentally made present in analogy to the way of the kenosis of the divine Word: “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 representation of Christ grows in conformity to the communicative understanding of revelation as a soteriologically-orientated sacramental occurrence. The traditional substance-ontological representation of Jesus Christ, and a sacerdotal-cultic understanding of ministry, are broken open, and the fact of Jesus Christ being a man does not play a role in this soteriological perspective. This enables the Church to become a fraternal partnership-based Church that calls on men and women alike to follow Jesus Christ. The reflections with regard to women in the (sacramental) ministry are thus fundamentally placed at the service of a reform of the Church ministry - precisely in the sense of a critique of “clericalism”, which Pope Francis repeatedly emphasises as a threat to the credibility of the Church.

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 100-101.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 8.

## 6. Looking back at the argumentation and perspectives

### 6.1 Looking back at the argumentation

(114) In the universal Church context of the Roman Catholic Church, the effort of theological argumentation is a necessary prerequisite for a dialogue with the current authorities which can bring about a change in the framework for action by the Church. There is also a need to engage in dialogues about reasoned positioning in the ecumenical dialogue with Churches which, often after a long struggle, have now reached different understandings of our issues than that of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, there are other sources of knowledge than theological scholarship. Experiences are an impetus for change and renewal. The “signs of the times” are a place of knowledge. Watchful awareness of basic convictions in the social public sphere is more than advisable. These hermeneutical considerations which are set out in the orientation text are taken into account in the argumentation presented here. At the same time, it is important to look at concrete aspects of the topic.

(115) The general lines of the arguments presented here can be summarised as follows:

(116) Gender equality in the Church is an essential touchstone of the credible, effective proclamation of the Gospel to all people. It is not only the Second Vatican Council, and subsequently the Würzburg Synod, which emphasise in the Biblical tradition that the Church as a whole is called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ. Everyone is to bring this about in their own way, and for their own part<sup>27</sup>. It is therefore stated that “everyone is called to advocate the message of Jesus Christ in word and deed”<sup>28</sup>. All who are baptised are united by a common task and responsibility “to «give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope» (1 Peter 3:15) to ourselves and to the people with whom we live”<sup>29</sup>.

(117) Outstanding women with prophetic courage have stood up for human rights in every period of history. Today too, countless women who are mothers, religious, theologians, spiritual guides, and in other ways of life around the world, are living the Gospel in word and deed. A distinction between the diaconate and the other forms of sacramental ministry is historically demonstrable. Taking a look at the universal Church shows that, in the vast majority of cases, it is women who take up a pastoral commitment and are willing to take on leadership responsibilities.

(118) There is no uninterrupted line of tradition for excluding women from the ministry of proclamation of the Gospel. Besides supposedly unambiguous statements in the mainstream of theological tradition arguing against women, there have always also been contrary developments. They brought new perspectives and answers to the demands of the respective time and culture. Women were involved in this to a significant degree.

(119) The new approach to the ministries in the Biblical texts, and the approach to the fundamental equality of all faithful, means placing the question of granting women access to the sacramental ministry in the context of the fundamental renewal of the theology of ministry. The question of the representation of Christ is to be distinguished from that of the natural likeness to a man. Jesus Christ is present when people act in His Spirit.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *Die Beteiligung der Laien an der Verkündigung* (the participation of the laity in proclamation), 2.1.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, *Unsere Hoffnung* (our hope), Introduction.

(120) The contours of a gender-equitable Church can be seen in places where everyone sees themselves as a community of equals following Jesus: In this community there is no discrimination, and no power imbalance is caused by questions of status. Everyone is seeking the truth as equals. Women visionaries and prophets are also heard. The words of Jesus “But it shall not be so among you” (Mark 10:43) are an incentive to invest time, strength and endurance in this hope.

## 6.2 The outlook

(121) There will always be “as many concrete answers” to the question of the relevance of the Christian faith “as there are figures of living Christianity among us”<sup>30</sup>. It is always about communicating the “provocative power of our hope [...] also for all those who have difficulty with this Church, for the distressed and disappointed, for the wounded and embittered”<sup>31</sup>.

(122) The renewal of the Church “is not exhausted in individual synodal reform measures”<sup>32</sup>. The fundamental question arises as to whether the integration of women into the existing church offices and ministries is sufficient in itself to meet the demands of the Christian Gospel. Is our “church life not itself far too obscured and constrained by fear and faint-heartedness, too caught up in examining itself, all too driven by concern for self-preservation and self-reproduction [...]?”<sup>33</sup>.

(123) The contribution made by women thinkers outside the mainstream is an essential part of the Christian tradition, and must be made visible in order to be able to take account of the increasing complexity of the world in which we live. The discourse changes when women’s traditions and their perception of reality as a God-human-world relationship are a natural part of the manner in which the Roman Catholic Church too is perceived. Controversies must be fought out. There is a need to put an end to practices that hurt people.

(123) A Gospel-orientated, people-orientated Church will also have the courage to try new things, trusting in the presence of God’s Spirit. The transformation processes in which the Church’s pastoral care, and the public significance of the Church worldwide, currently cause us to keep a look-out for creative ideas as to how the Gospel can reach and transform all people: God promises people that He will be eternally merciful, despite all their guilt, and regardless of any achievements of their own.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Part II, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Part I.8.