



Presentation

of Synodal Forum II

“Priestly existence today”

for the First Reading

at the Fourth Synodal Assembly (8-10 September 2022)

for the implementation text

“Breaking with taboos and normalisation -
votes on the situation of non-heterosexual priests”

[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 19 Yes, 4 No]

Introduction

It is not only since the #OutInChurch initiative that it has been known that a not inconsiderable number¹ of Catholic priests are homosexual, bisexual, or otherwise not heterosexually orientated². What was placed under a taboo and denied for decades and centuries is now known and accepted in some places. A culture of acceptance and appreciation towards non-heterosexual priests has become established in parts of the Church (associations, orders, local churches...). At the same time, a large number of non-heterosexual priests still live in shadow existences into which they are forced by the applicable provisions of canon law and by discriminatory practice on the part of the Church. According to the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016), the Church cannot “admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practise homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’” (No. 199).³ The theoretical exclusion of non-heterosexual men from the orders stands in contrast to their very existence. What on the one hand earns the church lead-

¹ The theologian and psychological psychotherapist Wunibald Müller puts the figure at well over 20 %.

² ‘Non-heterosexual priests’ will be referred to below throughout.

³ The concrete interpretation of this provision is controversial in theological circles, as well as amongst practitioners in the Church. The linguistic vagueness as to what is actually meant by “deep-seated tendencies” is admittedly part of the problem, since on the one hand it creates uncertain situations under canon law, and on the other hand it documents the ineffectiveness of the Church’s official language.

ership the (comparatively mild) accusation of institutional hypocrisy is on the other hand all too often an existential problem for those concerned: They know that their very existence as non-heterosexual priests is unwanted and forbidden by the church leadership, and in practice this often leads to them concealing their sexual orientation. But having to conceal and treat as taboo a part of one's own identity very often has a detrimental impact on the mental and physical health of those concerned. It is a serious encroachment on personal rights, and a violation of dignity. Fears of denunciation are constant companions of many non-heterosexual priests who have not come out. This situation exposes them in many ways to the danger of becoming victims of abuse of power. But those concerned also report overexertion and an exaggerated, anticipatory obedience to which they felt compelled in order not to draw attention to themselves, and an obligation to do everything to compensate for the supposed stigma in this way. They also ultimately experience the deliberate de-thematisation and large-scale silence regarding their situation as a subtle instrument of power that can be turned against them. On the one hand, non-heterosexual priests who have come out experience acceptance and support from people around them and from the church hierarchy; on the other hand, they experience distancing, considerable problems with the church leadership, and massive hostility⁴. Non-heterosexual priests, whether or not they have come out, complain that they can still not have an encounter with the Church's leadership on an equal footing, partly because the frequent reference to adherence to celibacy does not even permit a discussion of the problematic situation of minority stress and stress resulting from concealment. There is a lack of partners to talk to, and an inability to talk on the part of the church leadership. At the same time, the fear of sanctions makes any honest dialogue impossible.

The Synodal Assembly is aware of the at times precarious situation in which non-heterosexual priests find themselves, and wishes to help break with the taboos and normalise their situation. The goal is a Church in which, everywhere and at all levels, it is not sexual orientation - regardless of whether or not a person has come out - but human and professional aptitude that decides on access to and continuance in the Church's ministry. The Assembly therefore herewith resolves:

Motion

1. **Truthfulness and acknowledgement:** The Catholic Church in Germany acknowledges the reality of non-heterosexual priests. She openly acknowledges them - in all respect, in all esteem, in all clarity.
2. **Dealing with discrimination:** The Catholic Church in Germany is to face up to Her own discrimination of non-heterosexual priests, and to begin to come to terms with and

⁴ The fact that they are treated as scapegoats for sexualised violence in the Church is experienced by non-heterosexual priests as a culmination of the many forms of discrimination. However, the concentration of male victims of sexualised violence can be adequately explained by the more intensive contact that Catholic priests have with male minors when working with what used to be purely male altar boys, and in Catholic boarding schools. Argumentative short-sightedness also disregards the difference between sexual and sexualised violence. The MHG Study however shows that the majority of priests who committed assaults were not concerned with fulfilling sexual needs, but with exercising power through sexualised humiliation.

acknowledge it in a dialogue with those concerned. Ways of coming to terms with this still need to be sought and found. This could include steps such as listening to and coming to terms with the stories of suffering told by non-heterosexual priests, and confessing the share that the institutions bear in the guilt, as well as coming to terms with the emergence and defence of the negative portrayal of homosexuality, confidence-building measures in which non-heterosexual bishops also come out and diversity in the episcopate also becomes visible

3. **Sensitisation and respect:** The Catholic Church in Germany promotes and demands that all ministers and persons in positions of responsibility treat non-heterosexual priests with the respect and sensitivity to which all other people are equally entitled, regardless of their sexual orientation. Anyone who exhibits discriminatory attitudes cannot hold positions of responsibility and leadership. The Catholic Church in Germany works together with church, governmental and civil society anti-discrimination agencies in order to support sensitisation.
4. **Legal equality:** The bishops and persons in positions of responsibility in priestly training advocate that the ban on the training and ordination of non-heterosexual men (cf. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* 199 to 201) should be lifted at the level of the universal Church, and that all negative statements regarding their sexual orientation should be deleted from official Church documents.

Reasoning

The forms and the degree of acceptance of and appreciation towards non-heterosexual priests vary in intensity from one part of the Church to another. A culture of open acceptance and appreciation towards non-heterosexual priests is already being practised in some areas; others practice forms of tacit acceptance, whilst unconcealed rejection, discrimination and defamation continue to prevail in many places. True, overcoming existing discrimination is the most immediate and obvious task, but non-heterosexual priests consider even forms of tacit acceptance to be insufficient. Honest appreciation requires that they be acknowledged openly and unmistakably as part of our Church.

Years and decades of experience of discrimination have inflicted deep psychological wounds on many non-heterosexual priests, as well as mental and physical illnesses. Acceptance and appreciation include acknowledging past and present guilt and suffering, which is why coming to terms with the history of guilt in a dialogue and on an equal footing is a *sine qua non* for many of those concerned.

If a cultural change towards an appreciative approach to non-heterosexual people is to take place (cf. Synodal Forum IV's foundational text and implementation text on A re-evaluation of homosexuality in the Magisterium), which includes a normalisation of the situation of non-heterosexual priests, the institution as a system, as well as its individual representatives, must undergo processes of learning and change. These processes can be supported by working together with anti-discrimination agencies. At the same time, a genuine, credible cultural change inevitably requires consequences when persons in positions of responsibility refuse to act respectfully, and express discriminatory attitudes.

The ban on the training and ordination of non-heterosexual men in *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* No. 199 to 201 constitutes one of the foundations of canon law for discrimination against non-heterosexual men and priests who have already been ordained. This provision needs to be rescinded in order to achieve legal equality and normalisation, and all negative statements on the part of the Church's Magisterium regarding the sexual orientation of non-heterosexual men need to be discontinued.