



## Presentation

### of Synodal Forum II

### “Priestly existence today”

### for the Second Reading

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

### for the foundational text “Priestly existence today”

**[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 22 Yes, 6 No]**

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## 1. Guidance/Introduction

The analysis is unequivocal: The theology and everyday reality of the priestly ministry have been in a state of crisis for years, and this has implications for the whole life of the Church. Many of the questions being asked relating to the priestly existence have been under discussion for as many as 50 years, and have not been answered satisfactorily. The priestly ministry in all of its dimensions is being questioned in this context.

There is no doubting the fact that there are many priests who exercise their ministry in a good and appropriate way and bear witness through an authentic celibate way of life. The many cases of sexualised violence perpetrated by clerics however call for significant changes in view of the number of unreported cases that can be assumed to exist<sup>1</sup>. The increasing number of failings that have been uncovered in connection with cases of sexualised violence, and the dynamics of concealment that have been revealed in this process, are not the only reasons why many faithful have become alienated and have gone so far as leaving the Church.

The call for substantial systemic change is becoming more pressing, without it being clear how this can be implemented in theological and practical terms. There is a certain bewilderment with regard to the question of a viable vision for the future of the priestly ministry, which after all is a constituent element of the sacramental constitution of our Church. From today's

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

perspective, the theological reasoning often comes up against the limits of logic, whilst many questions reach a broad-based consensus:

- A priesthood that is theoretically reserved for heterosexual men alone seems questionable and not compatible with actual practice.
- The exclusion of women from admission to the priesthood causes consternation, and there is an unmistakable demand for it to be re-examined.
- There is a widespread lack of acceptance today of celibacy as an obligatory way of life for priests.
- There are loudly-voiced calls for the opportunity for homosexuality to also be discussed among priests.

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

A prolonged process of discernment, under the guidance of the universal Church, is evidently needed. The question of why the ordained priestly ministry is needed can only be answered in part at present.

The current reflections transcend the status quo of the priestly ministry, accentuating the fact of all priestly ministries being embedded in the baptismal and confirmation vocation in the sense of the theology of the people of God, as formulated by the Second Vatican Council. The Biblical testimony is unequivocal in the thematic context. In the strict and proper sense, there is only one (high) priest, namely Jesus Christ. And the talk is of the royal priesthood and holy nation on which redemption has been conferred (cf. *1 Peter 2:9*).

It is therefore clear to which reference values the official priesthood, as a priesthood of ministry, is orientated and assigned: to the Lord and to the royal priesthood and holy nation, on which the common priesthood has been conferred.

Firstly, the priesthood testifies in a polar relationship to the abiding presence of Jesus. He is present in His Church, especially also in the sacraments, but as the one who is present, He in His sovereignty is beyond human control. The priesthood of ministry stands for the divine call to the congregation, and together they bear witness as the people of God to the salvific presence of the Risen Lord in the world.

Secondly, the priesthood of ministry ensures that all members of the royal priesthood and holy nation can develop their dignity, gifts and charisms - in witnessing to the discipleship of Jesus Christ and reaching out to their sisters and brothers, and thus the priesthood of ministry brings the concerns of the faithful into the life of the Church.

This positioning provides a yardstick against which the respective shape of the priesthood of the ministry has to be measured, and to which Synodal Forum 2 submits itself with these considerations.

## 2. Developments in the Church

The situation in society, and also in the Church in this context, has changed considerably worldwide and in Germany since the Second Vatican Council. This development is particularly apparent following on from the disintegration of the bipolar world as a result of the changes that took place in 1989 and 1990, and has far-reaching effects on the life of the religions in general, as well as on that of the Church and of the faithful. Some developments in the Church will first be discussed in order to be able to contextualise the statements on the priestly existence.

Both the Catholic and the Evangelical Churches in Germany are experiencing a sharp decline in membership<sup>2</sup>. Whilst there were still 28.3 million Catholics in the year of Reunification, thirty years later in 2020, the Church only had 22.2 million registered members; this is a decline of about 22%, whereas the population of Germany actually increased in the same period, namely from 79.75 million to 83.2 million; as a percentage, it fell from 35.5% to 26.7% in 2020<sup>3</sup>. A major reason for the decline in the number of Catholics is the number of people leaving the Church: All together more than 3 million people have left the Catholic Church in the past thirty years.

The remainder can be explained by demographic developments and a decline in the number of baptisms. The statistics show that there were almost 300,000 Catholic baptisms in 1990, whereas in 2020 there were only 104,610, accounting for 13.5% of births. Is the Catholic Church in the process of becoming an irrelevant minority? A similar development can also be observed in the number of Catholic weddings, which fell from 114,000 down to 11,018. This trend can also be observed in Catholic funerals, albeit it is less drastic<sup>4</sup>. This trend has presumably been exacerbated in the past few years by the pandemic.

Another indicator of the crisis facing the Catholic Church is the average number of churchgoers, which has fallen from 6.19 million in 1990, representing 21.9%, to 1.3 million, representing 5.9%<sup>5</sup>. This development is also massively reflected when it comes to the number of priests (priests in religious orders and secular priests). Whilst there were almost 20,000 priests in Germany in 1990, their number had fallen to 12,565 by 2020, which corresponds to a decline of about 40%. At the same time, the number of priests from abroad working in Germany has steadily increased. There were 2,135 such priests in 2020, the majority of whom were from India and Poland, and this both constitutes an enrichment and entails a challenge when it comes to reconciling different mentalities. The decline in the number of priestly ordinations is even more marked. There were as many as 295 in 1990, but by 2020 the number had fallen to a low of 56, representing a decline of as much as around 80%<sup>6</sup>.

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

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

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

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

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

It is also worth mentioning the number of priests who have left the ministry for various reasons. It is estimated at 1-2 priests per diocese per year in Germany, which means that between 810 and 1620 priests have left the ministry within 30 years. One of the main causes is that the priest concerned does not feel able to live up to the promise of celibacy<sup>7</sup>. A common reproach that is repeatedly levelled in this context is that priests are not keeping their promise of celibacy, and that this leads to a loss of credibility in the performance of the priesthood. There are repeated references to the problem of loneliness among priests, something which increases as people age<sup>8</sup>.

Developments were different with regard to the numbers of other pastoral workers<sup>9</sup>. The number of permanent deacons in particular has gone up by more than a third. The number of lay people in the pastoral ministry rose from about 5,200 in 1990 to 7,670 in 2020. There has however been a reversal of this growth trend towards stagnation or a decline in recent years. The trend in the number of students of all theological subjects in Germany is very much downwards.

There is concern in youth work, which reaches a large number of children and young people in the areas of social engagement, working with altar servers, and church music, especially in choirs<sup>10</sup>, that effects of the pandemic are being felt, and that this could have an impact on the number of vocations in all ecclesiastical vocations.

Pastoral developments in the dioceses also have an impact on the question of priestly identity. The figures and trends have had a far-reaching, comprehensive impact on pastoral work and forms of organisation in pastoral work in the German dioceses in recent years, and have led to processes of change being initiated in pastoral care and congregational structure. Church buildings have been abandoned, sold or assigned to another purpose in numerous dioceses. Approximately 550 churches and chapels in Germany have been abandoned, demolished or given up since 2000, so that a total of approximately 22,000 churches and chapels remain. A number of dioceses have plans to assess the church buildings in order to determine which ones should be retained in future.

In addition to this development, there have been extensive changes in the pastoral care field in almost all German dioceses which have led and are continuing to lead to parishes being merged to form pastoral care units or parish associations. A variety of leadership models are being proposed in this context, from a priest exercising leadership in the pastoral sphere with in some cases more than 20,000 congregation members<sup>11</sup>, so that one might speak of an

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<sup>7</sup> The “Priests in Dialogue” initiative was launched in 2005 by dioceses that regularly invite their priests who have left the ministry, with the aim of overcoming disenfranchisement, preventing alienation, and exchanging ideas on how to improve relations with one another. The Pi Dialogue was held in Würzburg from 2005-2018. The Archdiocese of Munich adopted the Pi Dialogue in 2016, and was joined by the diocese of Augsburg in 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/ueberfordert-der-zoelibat-unsere-priester>; staff in the Recollectio House in Münsterschwarzach indicate a close link between loneliness and burn-out among priests.

<sup>9</sup> Permanent deacons, parish expert workers and pastoral assistants.

<sup>10</sup> There were about 360,000 altar servers in 2020, 660,000 members between the ages of 7 and 28 in the member associations of the Federation of German Catholic Youth, and about 72,000 young people are involved in some 4,000 choirs in the Catholic Church.

<sup>11</sup> Some newly-planned parishes are to include as many as up to 100,000 congregation members.

“episcopalisation” of the priestly ministry, through leadership models consisting of several pastors according to the “*in solidum*” model, to multiprofessional teams. These new models of pastoral work, and also of leadership in large new units, pose major challenges to the leaders as well as to the teamwork skills of both the priests and all pastoral employees. New forms of voluntary leadership by lay people are being developed, thus creating a need for new job profiles to be developed. Many priests feel unable to cope with these changes, or do not recognise the motivations of their vocation in them. Conflicts also arise in connection with the priest’s ambition for power and his role in the Church. The question arises in this respect of the identity of the priest in this new phase of the development of the Church, also given that there is a need to strike a balance between administrative tasks and pastoral care.

All reflections on the priestly existence and on collaboration between priests and pastoral workers must take account of these fundamental changes, and develop visions and prospects for pastoral care and for shaping the Church in the future. A reform aimed at providing for parishes to also be led by lay people was halted in July 2020 by an Instruction of the Vatican<sup>12</sup>. The traditional parish model of a parish led by a priest as a pastor will nevertheless have to be increasingly supplemented or replaced by new forms of leadership. Due to the diversity of structures, a majority of pastors have been complaining for a long time about a too large share of administrative and organisational work, which prevents them from carrying out the essential ministry to God’s people. There is an urgent need for reform in this respect too.

### 3. Change structures that promote abuse

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

The “MHG Study”<sup>13</sup>, which was published in 2018, revealed that it is not only transformation processes in society and the Church that make it necessary to fundamentally re-orientate the priesthood. The high number of priests who became offenders, and the systemic facilitation of acts of sexualised and other abuses of power that have been exposed, intensify the need for a re-examination. The data contained in the study, which also assumes that there is a large number of unreported cases, show an offender quotient of 5.1% of priests working in diocesan ministry. Roughly speaking, this is one in 20 priests<sup>14</sup>. These are therefore by no means isolated

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<sup>12</sup> The text of the Instruction can be found at: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>.

<sup>13</sup> The Study, commissioned by the German Bishops’ Conference, is named after the research locations Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen.

<sup>14</sup> “The number of clerics accused - 38,156 sets of personnel records and reference files from the 27 dioceses dating from 1946 to 2014 were reviewed as part of the research project (SP6). Information regarding allegations of the sexual abuse of minors was found to exist with regard to 1,670 clerics of the Catholic Church. This represented 4.4 percent of all clerics from 1946 to 2014 whose personnel records and other documents were reviewed in the dioceses. This figure constitutes a conservative estimate, and findings from research into the unknown area suggest that the actual value is higher. The share among diocesan priests was 5.1 percent (1,429 accused persons). It was 2.1 percent (159 accused persons) among priests within religious orders who are governed by “*Gestellungsverträge*” (a contract conferring a form of stipend), and 1.0 percent (24 accused persons) among full-time deacons. Where the personnel records of clerics who were accused in the course of the application procedure for “benefits in recognition of the suffering imposed on the victims of sexual abuse” were reviewed, only 50 percent of the personnel records or other church documents relating to clerics with regard to whom the allegations had been classified by the Catholic Church in the applications as being plausible

cases, as is sometimes argued! Far too much harrowing suffering and life-long traumatising of the victims of sexualised violence could have been prevented if consistent action had been taken in time. And although the Catholic Church has been experiencing the phenomenon of a puzzled system since 2010, the forces of inertia are immensely strong. The systemic changes that are required are inevitable, and call for all levels of the hierarchy to take responsibility. The Forum believes in this regard that it makes sense to first look at the typology of the accused, also with the aim in mind of countering blanket suspicion. By analogy with typologies of sexual abusers outside the church context, the Study identifies three basic patterns of accused persons.

1. “Accused persons who had committed sexual abuse on several persons affected under the age of 13, who committed such offences over a period of more than six months, and with regard to whom the first accusation was documented not long after their ordination, can be assigned to a **“fixed type”** in which there are indications of a possible paedophilic preference disorder in the sense of a primary or secondary paedophilic tendency. The life of a priest in the Catholic Church, with its extensive opportunities for contact with children and juveniles, is highly likely to attract this type of individual.
2. A **“narcissistic-sociopathic type”** of accused person can be described as a second characteristic. Such a person exercises his power not only in the sexual abuse of children and juveniles, but also in an inappropriate manner in other settings. Sexual abuse manifests itself here as one among several forms of narcissistic abuse of power in such cases. (...) The power available to an ordained priest by virtue of his office offers many different opportunities to this type (...).
3. A third group of accused persons can be described as a **“regressive-immature type”**, which refers to accused persons whose personal and sexual development is deficient. These include both heterosexual and homosexual accused persons. (...) The obligation to remain celibate could offer members of this type a misconceived possibility of not having to adequately confront the formation of their own sexual identity. (...).”<sup>15</sup>

Conclusions about the changes needed in the selection, training and guidance of seminarians, as well as lifelong guidance for priests, can already be drawn after reading these offender descriptions. In doing so, the research consortium urges that one should not only aim “at the symptoms of an undesirable development, and thus prevent a debate taking place on the

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were found to contain a corresponding reference to the accusation or offence. This means that half of all cases would not have been discovered as part of a review of personnel records pure and simple, had the persons affected not actively applied for “benefits in recognition of the suffering imposed on the victims of sexual abuse”. This provides an indication of the extent of the unknown area that can be assumed to exist” [https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-Endbericht-Zusammenfassung.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-Endbericht-Zusammenfassung.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> MHG Study: Research project, Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference, p. 12, source (in German): [www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf), most recently retrieved 8 January 2022. Emphasis by the authors  
“What is more, the inability of individuals of this type to enter into a mature partnership does not need to be socially justified if they become priests. The first accusation often does not occur in this group until after a prolonged period of latency that occurs subsequent to being ordained as a priest. One reason for this might be that the barrier to sexual abuse offences is not broken down until overburdening, isolation and a lack of support from the Church with regard to such problems have increased over time.” (Ebd.)

fundamental problem posed by clerical power”<sup>16</sup>. The Synodal Path on which the Catholic Church in Germany as a whole is embarking therefore serves to redirect structural conditions that favour abuse. A fundamental debate on the priestly ministry is at the heart of the reflections of the Forum on the Priestly existence today.

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

The following are included among the recommendations drawn from the Study, along with better recordkeeping, and further research on the topic:

In addition to the requirement of a mature personality, also one that is self-confident in terms of sexuality, it was listed that dealing with one’s own sexuality cannot be guaranteed by a purely project-based approach<sup>17</sup>. Appropriately selecting candidates, using established psychological methods, as well as their guidance “with regard to the challenges posed by a life of celibacy, which is not necessarily chosen voluntarily, but is compulsory for ordination as a priest”<sup>18</sup> are to be guaranteed. In-service psychological counselling for priests is to be made a permanent feature here, not only in the form of a pastoral-spiritual approach<sup>19</sup>.

In addition to the need to discuss the appropriate justification for obligatory celibacy, and the recommendation of our Forum as presented below - namely to broaden the conditions of admission with regard to the ways of life<sup>20</sup>, the first reflections on this can be found in the implementation texts of the Forum on professionalism and personal development, which are also intended to further develop and evaluate basic and further training.

The potential for change in the largely closed system of training for the priesthood also includes the perception that comprehensive training in separate institutes hardly seems to make sense any more in the face of the dwindling number of candidates. Over and above this, in the interest of establishing professional standards and avoiding misogynistic tendencies, as well as given the prospect of interprofessional cooperation in the (large) pastoral spaces of the future, providing joint training to all vocations within pastoral care is also a sensible, necessary further development. It might also be beneficial in this regard to allow women to be ordained<sup>21</sup>. The training for the priesthood to date should be put to the test with regard to these aspects.

Many of the needs for change that have been highlighted stem from a lack of standards for professionalisation and professionalism. Developing appropriate standards, enabling a feedback culture, and if necessary establishing sanction measures, are the tasks that are introduced in the implementation text entitled “Professionalisation and personality development”. Such a feedback culture is intended not only to enable unilateral feedback, but by using reflection and

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<sup>16</sup> Ebd., p. 18.

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

<sup>18</sup> Ebd. p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. ebd.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Implementation text entitled “Celibacy of priests - encouragement and opening”.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. results of Synodal Forum III, as well as the implementation text entitled “Overcoming clericalism - Opportunities through a plural ministry structure.”

regulation to make sure that proximity and distance of priests to members of the congregation, families, and especially children and young people in basic and further training, accompanied by trained experts and other assistance from the Vicariates General/ordinariates, are appropriately shaped, and assume binding legal force.

Large numbers of offences committed by the third group of offenders did not begin until after an average period of service of approx. 8-14 years. The assumption that this has to do with overburdening and loneliness after a certain period of service has implications for the standards that need to be developed with regard to professionalisation. Considerations with regard to way of life are addressed in the implementation text on celibacy to some extent. This also needs to be considered when revising the “*ratio nationalis*” (the nationwide framework statutes for training for the priesthood), which has already been drawn up by a working group of the German Bishops’ Conference. The implementation of these statutes should be based on broad expertise from the different professional groups, with the aid of psychological skills. Suppression of the topic of homosexuality among priests and candidates for ordination also comes into view in connection with this group of offenders, and this should be changed. Reference is made in this regard to the corresponding elaborations in Synodal Forum IV, and to the implementation text on homosexuality presented by Synodal Forum II.

Special needs are identified in the training for the sacrament of penance. Twofold awareness-raising is called for. Firstly, awareness-raising with regard to the possibilities of spiritual abuse is to be promoted in the training and guidance standards, since particular attention needs to be paid to the framework of the sacrament of confession in its personal attentiveness and to the consequent personal power as a place of abuse. Furthermore, a heightened awareness is also to be created of the possibility for those affected to make a suggestion or to name names in confession.

Secondly, offenders have used confession as a way of revealing offences<sup>22</sup>. There is a need to raise awareness and train confessors to find solutions when offenders come forward. The same applies to confidential conversations within any form of spiritual guidance.

There is a need all in all for a fundamental examination to be carried out of the ordained ministry of the priest and of his understanding of his role vis-à-vis non-ordained persons. This needs to extend to the core of the priestly self-understanding, and should not be confined to lip service on the part of those holding responsibility within the Church<sup>23</sup>. Chapter 5 constitutes an attempt to meet this demand by re-accentuating the priestly theology of this foundational text.

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

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<sup>22</sup> “Accused clerics not infrequently see confession as an opportunity to reveal their own abuse crimes. The protected sphere of the confessional box was even used by accused clerics to prepare or conceal offences in some cases. The Sacrament of Confession is therefore particularly significant in this context. The responsibility of the confessor for the adequate clarification, processing and prevention of individual sexual abuse offences needs to be emphasised from a scientific point of view.” <https://www.dbk.de/themen/sexualisierte-gewalt-und-praevention/forschung-und-aufarbeitung/studien/mhg-studie>, Research project, Overall final report. p. 17. Most recently retrieved 25 April 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. ebd.



Not only the MHG Study, but also other diocesan studies, and the inclusion of the victims in the process of analysis, are pushing for a renewed examination of the Church's understanding of ministry. The misconception of priestly ordination, which can be summarised under the keyword clericalism, is to be considered in this context above all other things. Pope Francis confronts this with a reinforced approach to synodality<sup>24</sup>. The under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Nathalie Becquart, clarifies this idea by stating that "the vision of a synodal Church is a means to overcome clericalism and get rid of it (...)"<sup>25</sup>. There seems to be a consensus in the universal Church that clericalism runs counter to the fundamental understanding of the priestly ministry, and that changes are necessary. The "internally-blind regime of monopolised male celibate sacral power",<sup>26</sup> as Gregor Hoff puts it, needs to be overcome.

This has implications among other things for the theology of the "*repraesentatio Christi*", which we elaborate in Chapter 5 of the foundational text.

As far as the issue of improperly-exercised power is concerned, cross-references need to be made to Synodal Forum I. Synodal Forum III discusses the potential to rectify the power imbalance and the male-orientated structures by admitting women to ordination and increasing their number in leadership positions. The "*repraesentatio Christi*" with regard to gender affiliation is also discussed here. The topic of sexuality is not only addressed in Synodal Forum IV, but also has a direct impact on the reflections of the Synodal Forum Priestly existence today. Confronting one's own sexuality, and the topics related to eroticism and emotionality, is increasingly being set as a topic in training and in occupational standards. This seems to become particularly necessary if the request to lift the obligation of celibacy were not to be complied with.

As the ongoing discussions on the basis of the abovementioned studies reveal, protecting the offenders has too often been prioritised over protecting victims of sexualised violence. The reflection on the conclusions that need to be drawn must not stop with the priestly ministry, but calls for a further development in the understanding of ministry and in the exercise of the episcopal ministry too. Conclusions are to be consistently drawn about power-abusing structures and identities here too. The Synodal Forum does not present a separate text on this, but refers to the necessity to continue to work on it, and to reflect on it in theological terms, by cross-referencing to Synodal Forum I. It is important to develop an awareness of the problem where insufficient measures of sanctioning and prevention tend to help preserve clerical power structures if they merely target the symptoms of an undesirable development<sup>27</sup>. The implementation text entitled "Prevention of sexualized violence and dealing with perpetrators in the Catholic Church" also takes a look at concrete measures to this end.

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<sup>24</sup> As he emphasised back in 2015: "What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word "synod". Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice." [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html), most recently retrieved 25 April 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Lebendige Seelsorge: Klerikalismus*. Vol 1/2022, Echter-Verlag Würzburg, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Ebd. p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. MHG Study: Research project, Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference, pp.15-19, source: [www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf](http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf).

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

The foregoing remarks are largely orientated towards the status quo of the priesthood to date. The question is, however, is this sufficient? Are not much more profound changes called for? The findings from research to date make it glaringly clear that there is a need for change. The figures show that it is not just a matter of misconduct on the part of individuals, but that the priesthood, its implementation, and its viability, require a fundamental re-emphasis.

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

The various enquiries to the Church and the upcoming active and passive processes of change also pose the fundamental question to the Synodal Assembly of whether and for what purpose the priestly ministry is needed in the Church.

The sacramental necessity of the priesthood is in question. The specific ministry of the priest is also no longer plausible in parishes. Many congregations are looking for and finding quite pragmatic ways of organising church life without a priest in view of the shortage that already exists and of the foreseeable dramatic decline in the number of ordained ministers. The question as to the need for the priestly ministry thus triggers a salvific-critical or de-clericalising dynamic in these search movements, and these merit appreciation and acceptance. The traditional priestly ideal has not only been profoundly undermined by the abuse crisis, but due to an adaptation in theology and in the Church that has been rejected and delayed for a long time, and not least because of many class-orientated relics that are certainly not part of the ministry, it seems to be behind the times in many ways. The priest is no longer something that can be taken for granted, and his official actions are therefore no longer plausible within the Church. This must be soberly acknowledged. If a new plausibility for the sacramental ministry of the priest is to be found that is to meet the challenges of theology and of the present, it requires a conscious re-emphasis on the basis of the Biblical and of theological sources. Many of the previous strategies for answering the question of what an ordained priest is “permitted” to do, in contrast to the non-ordained priestly laity, have come to an end in the Church and in society. This fundamental question must be addressed in a credible manner.

Considerable urgency therefore attaches today to the question of what a priest is needed for. The Catholic tradition holds that the ordained minister constitutively maintains in the Church the presence of the essential counterpart of the divine promise and claim in the congregation. Just as the Church Herself is a sacrament, the sacramental ministry that is constitutive of Her is sacramental, and far transcends all that is functional and practical. It is the mission of the ordained minister to present the abiding intangibility of the divine claim.

After a theologically somewhat restorative phase concerning the ministry during which the pre-eminence of the ordained ministry was stressed, the Catholic tradition is currently faced with the task of learning synodically to adapt the structures of the theology of ministry in such a way

that the counterpart of the salvific acts of Jesus (*triplex munus Christi* = teaching, leading, sanctifying) can be more comprehensibly profiled in the actions of ordained priests.

The role of the priest is a factor in the history of religion which occurs in many religious cultures. The task of the priest consists of mediating the intangible, transcendent mystery that concerns humans unconditionally.

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

The Church needs priests because, according to the Biblical and ecclesial tradition, She needs the ones who are sent out (apostles) who legitimately connect the ecclesial action of the local Christian community with the universal Church - as it were like a notary in the secular domain who reduces the applicable law to the concrete situation and applies it according to this situation. Within the framework of his specific tasks, the ordained priest stands as a minister for the legitimate presence of the acts of the risen Christ, so that those who are baptised and confirmed can realise and live out the grace of baptism and the gift of the Spirit.

The profound meaning of the sacramental priesthood can only be regained beyond the outmoded class-orientated elements that have characterised this profession in the past, and which deprive it of a professional evaluation.

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

## 5. Theological reflections on the priestly ministry

All the considerations so far show that there is a need today for a renewed pastoral implementation of the sacramental priesthood, and this begins with an honest assessment<sup>28</sup> and locates its theological foundations in it. As Pope Francis stresses in his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, we are “living in times of change” which raise “new and old issues, in view of which a discussion is justified and necessary”<sup>29</sup>. Above all, however, an interpretation of the priesthood of the pastoral realities must be understood sacramentally, and must not be misunderstood in functional terms<sup>30</sup>.

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

In his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, Pope Francis desires a “pastoral conversion”<sup>31</sup> which is measured by the primacy of evangelisation, as the Church is to be a “sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1), and to share “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” with all (GS 1). In synodal terms, this can only be realised as the path of the whole people of God<sup>32</sup>. It is from this vocation of God’s people alone that reflection on the ministry of the priest is possible. For the priest comes out of the people of God, and his ministry is always to be understood in terms of this setting.

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

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Baumann, Klaus et al. (eds.), *Zwischen Spirit und Stress. Die Seelsorgenden in den deutschen Diözesen*, Würzburg 2017.

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

<sup>30</sup> The Lord Jesus, “whom the Father has sent into the world” (Jn 10:36) has made his whole Mystical Body a sharer in the anointing of the Spirit with which he himself is anointed. (2) In him all the faithful are made a holy and royal priesthood; they offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and they proclaim the perfections of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. (3) Therefore, there is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole Body; but each one ought to hallow Jesus in his heart, (4) and in the spirit of prophecy bear witness to Jesus. (4) The same Lord, however, has established ministers among his faithful to unite them together in one body in which, “not all the members have the same function” (Rom 12:4). These ministers in the society of the faithful are able by the sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins, (5) and they perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ. (PO 2-6)

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in: VAS 194 (24 November 2013), No. 111: “Evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary.”

people of God is confirmed and always recalled by the priest<sup>33</sup>. Even before the New Testament speaks about different services and offices, baptism and anointing with the Spirit form the sacramental foundation of churchhood. Each and every baptised person represents Christ and the Church.

The different representations of the Church already convey in the New Testament the perspective of serving. There are images that express in strong words the nearness between Christ and His Church, for example in the reflection on the Church as the body of Christ (e.g. Eph 4:12), whilst others consider the juxtaposition of Christ and the Church, such as when Christ is seen as the Bridegroom of the Church (cf. Eph 5:21-33). This is significant insofar as the Church may not equate Herself with Christ. *Lumen gentium* 8 consequently sees the Church in an analogy to Christ, but not in complete congruence. This analogy must also be observed for the ordained minister. He performs a service to the community as a member of the people of God. He is to perform his service in a community-building, motivating way for others, not in competition with the other baptised individuals. His service largely consists of promoting and affirming the revealed being of the Church and the ecclesial action of all the baptised.

The Biblical archetype of service is the washing of the feet, which Jesus concludes with the instruction: "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:1-17). Historically, a one-sided view has emerged. As Christ faces his Church, so the clergy emerged as a separate category facing the congregation, not only in the liturgical representation, but also in all the activities of the priest as ordained, teacher, king and prophet, to follow the image of the Christological offices. An understanding of the clergy came into being which made them the actual representatives of the Church to the congregation, and thus also of Christ. This perspective becomes problematic when it is no longer complemented by remembering the common sacramental foundation in baptism, as well as when the minister forgets the analogy that underpins his claim to represent Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest "is" Christ, albeit not as a substitute, but in the mode of the disappearance of his own person. He recedes behind Christ altogether.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*" of the Second Vatican Council attempts to eliminate potential, i.e. historically-conditioned, flaws. The concept of the Church as a hierarchically-ordered "*societas perfecta*", that is as a society of unequals, can still be found in the draft versions<sup>34</sup>. *Lumen gentium* itself then prefers the ecclesiology of the people of God such that the unity of the people of God precedes the hierarchical order of the Church. The equality of the dignity of the baptised goes first, and conditions the diversity that we find. The priesthood of the ministry is preceded by the common priesthood of all the faithful, which expresses itself in prophesy, leadership and witness. Thus the Council has laid the foundation for embedding the ministry of the priest in the many ministries and spiritual gifts in the Church.

The texts of the Council remain authoritative for today's reflection on the people of God and the priestly ministry. The German bishops considered and developed concrete consequences in their statement on the renewal of the pastoral ministry "*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*" of 1 August

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<sup>33</sup> PO 11

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Wenzel, Knut, *Knut Kleine Geschichte des II. Vatikanischen Konzils*, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 2005, 61-66.

2015<sup>35</sup>. Esteem for the gifts of the Spirit and the recognition that all are called through baptism to live a holy life and to contribute their own gifts to the Church<sup>36</sup> is significant here. The charisms of all who are baptised are emphasised as the richness of the Church. The text recalls the priestly dignity of those who are baptised, which cannot be increased. Ordained priests are to be instruments, but are not to form an estate of their own<sup>37</sup>.

These texts also constitute an important foundation for the further work of the Synodal Path. The reception of the Second Vatican Council is not complete with regard to the question of the essence of the priesthood. What is more, priests' self-perception and the perception of others do not always coincide. This may lead to (personal) crises of identity for priests and to confusion among the remaining faithful. It is then tempting to seek clarity through demarcation. Priests do not gain authority in the sense of *auctoritas* over the people of God by these means; at most they can rely on *potestas*. This touches on the issue of power<sup>38</sup>.

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

Each and every baptised person represents Christ, the only "high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (Hebr 5:10), who has made His Church into a kingdom of "priests for his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6). "The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly"<sup>39</sup>. The representation of Christ by the priest in the administration of the sacraments reserved for him is distinct from this, especially the celebration of the Eucharist. It is clear in Magisterial texts that the "*repraesentatio Christi*" by the priest is not limited solely to the sacramental celebration of or presiding over the Eucharist, but concerns the entire priestly existence<sup>40</sup>. This opens up the question of the relationship between the representation of Christ by the priest outside the Eucharist, and similarly the representation of Christ by all faithful.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher), *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*. Statement by the German bishops on the renewal of the pastoral ministry, in: *Die deutschen Bischöfe* 100, Bonn 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No. 9: "The anointing of the Holy which was poured out on the whole body of the Church "distributes special graces among the faithful of every state and condition of life, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (1 Cor 12:11). Through these he makes them suitable and ready to undertake various works and ministries for the renewal and full construction of the Church, according to the word: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit" (1 Cor 12:7)."

<sup>37</sup> Medard Kehl, Stephan Ch. Kessler, *Priesterlich werden. Anspruch für Laien und Kleriker*, Würzburg 2010, 19.

<sup>38</sup> The group of topics "office and leadership" is dealt with by the Synodal Forum "Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission".

<sup>39</sup> CCC 1546.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, in: VAS 105 (25 March 1992), No. 14: "In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ - the head and shepherd - authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation - particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit. In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the head and shepherd." *Pastores dabo vobis* No. 16 notes: "Inasmuch as he represents Christ the head, shepherd and spouse of the Church, the priest is placed not only *in the Church* but also *in the forefront of the Church*."

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

Whereas the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Orders, acts “in the person of Christ the Head” (LG 10) when administering the sacraments, and *the faithful* hence receive an assurance that the grace of the sacrament applies regardless of the holiness of the person administering it, this ministry to the people of God has no higher dignity or holiness. “The configuration of the priest to Christ the head - namely, as the principal source of grace - does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others.”<sup>41</sup>

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

### 5.3. The sacramental nature of ordained ministry

The sacramental ministry is part and parcel of the “essence” of what is Catholic. The sacramental understanding of the priest corrects a purely functional view of the ministry. The priest’s sacramental ministry is in essence a service rendered for unity “which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” in the celebration of the Eucharist (LG 11). This ministry of unity, as assessed in “*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*”, which is indispensable for the Church, is *the* unique feature of the priestly ministry. The sacramentality of the priesthood, and the holiness of the Church, by no means imply flawlessness. Pope Francis emphasises unequivocally: “The

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<sup>41</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 104. A note on the orientation of ontological statements towards the priesthood. A person who is ordained to the priesthood is the holder of a “*character indelebilis*”; he has been given an “indelible stamp”, and differs in “*essentia*” (ablative) “in essence” from the non-ordained faithful. These statements are not easy to understand. Firstly, because they presuppose an Aristotelian teaching of reality, which is not readily compatible with today’s understanding of reality. But it would be possible to cope with this given a few hermeneutic aids. It becomes more difficult if one interprets the ontological statements, which has often happened, in the sense of an essential superiority of the priest, thus encouraging a form of clerical glorification. It is therefore important to recall the meaning and the purpose of the ontological statements: If the Lord brings about grace and salvation in the Church through the sacraments, then the effective potential of the sacramental-priestly ministry must be existent independently of the moral disposition of the minister. This could however only be expressed in ontological categories. Perhaps an image helps to understand this: There is a road, a path to salvation, and it is secured with guard rails. The ontological reflections are, as it were, guard rails for reflection: If the believing person is so disposed, the administration of the sacrament by the priest can only be one thing, namely the mediation of salvation, regardless of the circumstances. However, if one confuses the reflections that are supposed to protect the lasting effectiveness of the priestly action with reflections that have the priestly state at their centre, then one confuses the road and the guard rail. But engineers who know how to make guard rails are neither road workers nor vehicles, nor the drivers who use the roads. The Church has unfortunately trained far too many engineers who only know how to build guard rails and crash barriers, and has sadly neglected road construction, vehicle construction, as well as driving instruction.

Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative.”<sup>42</sup>

The ordained priest has the prophetic task of expressing the standard of the Gospel, and of making clear in his sacramental actions “that God is faithful, that Christ Himself is present in the Church: real, concrete, personal and unadulterated”<sup>43</sup>. Ordination does not release him from the necessity to strive for credibility. “*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*” explains the wording of the constitution resulting from the Council *Lumen gentium* 10, “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated”. It is said not to be a matter of a larger quantity of holiness or dignity; in fact the essential difference consists in the sacramental ministry to the community and the congregation. Such ministry of unity is also realised by priests through their ministry of leadership. Here it is entirely at the service of the episcopate, which is the primary addressee of the ministry of unity.

The leadership ministry is a broad, open term<sup>44</sup>. Leadership serves in essence to enable participation by many in the diverse tasks of the Church. Leadership seeks the spiritual gifts, and it enables their realisation in the ministry for the unity of the Church. Leadership by priests understands “being church together” not in the sense of an isolated “rule”, but as a relational event. The priest himself is already in a sacramental relationship with the bishop, and shares in his leadership ministry. For without the bishop, there is no priest. Priests act “in collaboration with their bishops”<sup>45</sup>. The fellowship of the presbytery should also clarify the ministry of unity as a relational event. Baptised Christians participate in leadership insofar as they enrich the Church with their gifts and professions and also serve the cause of unity. Leadership is more than mere decision-making competence. It will also be important to emphasise this aspect against the background of the Vatican Instruction entitled “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church” of the Congregation for the Clergy of 20 July 2020. An expanded concept of leadership is called for in order to not only carry out the debates on competences and tasks under church law. At this point, however, it remains to be asked to what extent a priest’s leadership ministry is to be understood solely in terms of his “pastoral vocation”. Priestly leadership does not merely consist of being a pastor, but is rather to be understood in theological terms as a teaching ministry. Proclaiming the Gospel is the primary task of the leadership ministry<sup>46</sup>. It is a much lamented dilemma of the pastoral profession that administration and organisation overshadow the necessary pastoral care and spiritual leadership. This also entails the danger of functionalising the priestly vocation. The

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<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* on the call to holiness in today’s world. VAS 213 (19 March 2018), No. 52

<sup>43</sup> *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 41 et seqq.

<sup>45</sup> PO 77.

<sup>46</sup> For priests are brothers among brothers(51) with all those who have been reborn at the baptismal font. They are all members of one and the same Body of Christ, the building up of which is required of everyone.(52) Priests, therefore, must take the lead in seeking the things of Jesus Christ, not the things that are their own.(53) They must work together with the lay faithful, and conduct themselves in their midst after the example of their Master, who among men “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as redemption for many” (Mt 20:28). (PO 51-53a)



functions of other pastoral vocations, and their derivation from the episcopal ministry, should also be considered in this context.

#### 5.4. The evangelical counsels

The evangelical counsels which Jesus proposes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), namely of poverty, chastity and obedience, can be the expression of a life in the discipleship of Christ of all faithful (cf. LG 39). All three are mandatory under church law for faithful who have opted for them through profession in institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life (cf. can. 573 §1 CIC). They are a possible answer to the question of what it means to leave everything and follow Christ (Mt 10:28). Especially when it comes to possessions, celibacy and power, they also serve to flesh out discipleship for the so-called secular priest, who is called “to live these counsels in accordance with those ways and, more specifically, those goals and that basic meaning which derive from and express his own priestly identity”.<sup>47</sup>

The ministry of a priest is not only to be characterised by solidarity with the poor and deprived, but it is necessary to allow oneself to be evangelised by them<sup>48</sup>. As an indication of this, he is to live out his interactions in accordance with the evangelical counsel of *poverty*, which also needs to be re-examined today with regard to remuneration and the handling of financial possibilities (cf. can. 282 §1 and 2 CIC).

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

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

The celibate way of life presupposes a way of life that is rich in relationships, both within the Church as well as with regard to wider worldly relational structures. This however poses a risk of the celibate way of life leading to marginalisation if the symbolism is no longer supported by large sections of the people of God. In addition, sacramentality itself is at risk if celibacy is neither spiritually understood nor lived out in concrete, credible terms, and is tacitly and collectively undermined in a double life that is tolerated by the church leadership.

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

Around 10,000 secular priests, and roughly 2,000 priests in religious orders, ordained in Germany, as well as about 1,400 priests ordained in a foreign diocese, are active in the Church

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<sup>47</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, No. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198.

in Germany in a wide variety of areas<sup>49</sup>. A majority, but not all, are active in pastoral care in parishes. Other areas of activity include pastoral care of foreigners, pastoral care in universities and schools, adult education, or academies, Caritas, the associations and spiritual communities, youth pastoral care, hospital pastoral care and pastoral care for persons with disabilities, the Church's administration or the exercise of priestly activity in a secondary office (e.g. "worker priests"). Some priests perform their ministry as ordained bishops<sup>50</sup>. The ministry of the priest cannot therefore be reduced to that of the parish priest, but is regarded in terms of its sacramental dimension.

The jointly-trodden path (*syn-hodos*) is largely determined by the method ("*met-hodos*" - the path towards something). Pope Francis referred to this method in his address at the opening of the synod on young people as "an ecclesial exercise in discernment", consisting in a three-step process of spiritual discernment - perceiving, interpreting and choosing<sup>51</sup>. If the Church and the synod are synonymous<sup>52</sup>, then priests serve to call the people of God in their respective areas by accompanying them on the path there in a suitable manner, together with the people, in spiritual processes.

This requires a twofold perception and connection which establishes a joyful identity of the priest, as Pope Francis sets forth in his "Letter to priests": "For our hearts to be encouraged, we should not neglect the dialectic that determines our identity. First, our relationship with Jesus. [...] The other essential aspect of this dialectic is our relationship to our people"<sup>53</sup>. In the second step, the synodal method must be interpreted in the light of the "*salus animarum*" (can. 1752 CIC), and the faith of the whole Church *cum et sub Petro* must be distinguished from public opinion<sup>54</sup>. Synodality is not an end in itself after all, but "the *innermost goal* of the Synod as an instrument of the implementation of Vatican II can only be *mission*"<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. in this regard: Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher), *Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral*. May 2021, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. in this regard: Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher), *Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral*. May 2021, 9-19. The age structure will be added to.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Address at the opening of the synod on young people (3 October 2018): [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181003\\_apertura-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html).

<sup>52</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: *Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* (Arbeitshilfen 276), published by Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference, Bonn 2015, p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars (4 August 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, p. 27. Cf. for the interaction between hierarchical and charismatic gifts: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter "*Iuvenescit Ecclesia*" to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church, in: VAS 205 (15 May 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: *Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* (Arbeitshilfen 276), published by Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference, Bonn 2015, p. 92.

The synodal approach means a change and inculturation of attitudes and structures, as elaborated in the corresponding options.

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

Pope Francis calls in "*Querida Amazonia*" for an "Inculturation of forms of ministry"<sup>56</sup>. This applies not only to the Amazonas<sup>57</sup>. Inculturation is a twofold movement which includes both the transformation of culture through the Gospel, as well as receiving the Holy Spirit from culture<sup>58</sup>. This leads to two questions, on the one hand with regard to the way of life of the priest in our society, but on the other hand concerning the concrete life of the individual priest: (1) What does inculturation mean for a specific way of life of the priest in our secular and global society in which individual freedom and equality are highly valued? (2) This poses the following question for the priest, as it does for all faithful: How can faith be lived in an inculturated authentic and dialogic manner, i.e. *in dialogue and thus full of tension*, between a religiously-motivated counter-culture and a bourgeois way of life, and against the horizon of globalisation and the changes that it brings? All processes of change in the present reveal only one thing in the final analysis: The priesthood is embedded in history, and is therefore always to be understood as an incarnatory process. New forms of organisation, as they are to be shaped in the future and to some extent already now after the end of the popular church structures, call for a variety of configurations of priestly ministries.

## 6. Final remarks

The dilemma arising between the need for change and the concern to preserve the theology of the ordained ministry remains, even when the basic theological line of the Second Vatican Council is re-received presented above and consistently interpreted in terms of the character of the ministry, especially since the organisational structures of the church systems also cannot be so easily altered.

More profound changes are needed in order to enable the Catholic theory and tradition of the priestly ministry to be truly inculturated into contemporary society, and many of these changes have universal Church dimensions.

The implementation texts that have been formulated, and which the Synodal Forum on Priestly existence is presenting today, are therefore to a large extent proposals to be addressed in the

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, in: VAS 222 (2 February 2020), Nos. 85-90, here No. 85: "Inculturation should also be increasingly reflected in an incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry. If we are to inculturate spirituality, holiness and the Gospel itself, how can we not consider an inculturation of the ways we structure and carry out ecclesial ministries?"

<sup>57</sup> Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 115: "Grace supposes culture, and God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it."

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, No. 68: "On the one hand, a fruitful process takes place when the Gospel takes root in a given place, for "whenever a community receives the message of salvation, the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel". On the other hand, the Church herself undergoes a process of reception that enriches her with the fruits of what the Spirit has already mysteriously sown in that culture. In this way, "the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face". In the end, this means allowing and encouraging the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel to be preached "in categories proper to each culture, creating a new synthesis with that particular culture".

universal Church, primarily in a Synod or even in a Council. This also applies to a gender-equitable approach, and to systemic corrections in view of the scandal of the crime of abuse. At the same time, the tasks that can already be implemented now are urgent: Amendments to the training regulations to take all groups of pastoral vocations into account, the needs of professionalisation, and personality development.

The Synodal Forum is expressing requests to Rome in the shape of the implementation texts entitled “Celibacy of priests - encouragement and opening” and “Overcoming clericalism - plural ministry structures as an opportunity”. The same applies to the call for the admission of women and/or queer people, which is largely uncontroversial in Germany, as it is discussed in the implementation texts from the Synodal Forum entitled “Women in ministries and offices in the Church”, as well as the reflections on participation from the Synodal Forum “Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission”.

A foundation for further work is presented here with the present fundamental approach to the priestly way of life, the re-accentuation of the theology of the priestly ministry, as well as the reflection on the pastoral practice of the German Church, and this calls for further discussion.