



Presentation

of Synodal Forum II

“Priestly existence today”

for the First Reading

at the Third Synodal Assembly (3-5 February 2022)

for the implementation text

“The vow of celibacy in the priestly ministry”

[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 23 Yes, 4 No]

a) Motions on celibacy among diocesan priests

Introduction

The matter of priestly celibacy concerns many among the faithful. We wish for our deliberations to be followed by all, and not only by specialist theologians, and have therefore opted to use comprehensible language and a clear structure. We would furthermore like to make our discernment of spirits transparent, and are thus enabling everyone to follow our train of thought.

Our reflections are headed by a seven-fold “affirmation”:

- affirmation of the sacramentality of the Church,
- affirmation of a sacramental priesthood which is integral to our Catholic Church,
- affirmation of people being able to encounter priests who promise them salvation at the key points of human existence and in its ups and downs, and make it tangible,
- affirmation of the priestly ministry, allowing the abiding presence and working of Jesus Christ to be experienced in many ways throughout the world,
- affirmation that those people who are appointed to this ministry are called on to devote their entire lives and existence as witnesses of faith,

- affirmation of a priestly lifestyle which is shaped by the evangelical counsels - poverty, chastity and obedience¹. We are however primarily referring to celibacy here.
- affirmation of priestly celibacy as an appropriate witness, as a real symbol of the orientation of life towards the Lord, embedded within a long tradition and by spiritual experience, which is also enhanced by the knowledge of the strength of the community option of priests living a celibate life. Their manifold reasons can only be outlined here due to the available space.

At the same time, we perceive a restlessness among God's people - and also among ourselves - that has been going on for many decades. It is becoming stronger rather than weaker. Inner restlessness as well as inner peace are signs in the tradition of the discernment of spirits that need to be taken seriously. Such a distinction needs to be made because God can work through them and in them. Could it be that God is seeking to point us in a particular direction through this restlessness? It is the following aspects to which we refer in concrete terms:

We see that celibacy is an appropriate witness. At the same time, it is not the only appropriate witness. Sacramental marriage also points to God's love and unbreakable faithfulness towards His people, as it is already set out in Ephesians (Eph 5:31-32).

If celibacy is understood in the overall context of the evangelical counsels that make the orientation towards God recognisable, one can also ask whether other evangelical counsels might not be chosen just as easily as celibacy. Could not poverty, for example, in the sense of a modest lifestyle and of simplicity, make this orientation towards God recognisable, and indeed perhaps even easier to understand in an affluent society, than does celibacy?

We understand that celibacy testifies to a person's orientation towards God. The focus is placed on the mode of an abiding longing. At the same time - as we see in the Eastern Catholic Churches - a married priest bears witness to an equally significant facet of the orientation of human life towards God, namely that the fullness of life can only ever be received as a gift. A committed sacramental marriage can thus become a complementary witness that can also characterise and shape priestly life and contribute to a broadening of the innermost mystery of the priesthood. The "both ... and" which is typical of all that is Catholic could mean here that both celibacy and marriage of priests in common witness would come closer to the fullness of what is meant.

In addition, we see men who discover in an intensive process - before or after their ordination to the priesthood - that they are called to marriage, and at the same time feel an inner vocation to enter the priesthood². Their gifts, which could complement those of celibate priests, are lost to our Church because their two vocations, namely to the priesthood and to marriage, are regarded in the Latin Church as being incompatible. Are we therefore doing sufficient justice to existing charisms?

¹ A reference to the corresponding passage in the basic text will be included here.

² We are aware that there is also a question of homosexual priests.

We know that celibacy of priests has a long tradition in our Church. This also applies to the possibility and reality of married priests. Founded in the Biblical witness (1 Tim 3 and frequently), married ministers are a blessed reality, not only in the Orthodox Churches, but also in the Eastern Catholic Churches.

The admission of married men to priestly ordination is an exception in the Latin Church, but it is not unthinkable, especially since experience with them and with their acceptance on the part of the faithful is rather positive in many cases. The same applies to the priests from Eastern Catholic Churches who have long been living in some of our congregations.

We stand by this: The appropriateness of priestly celibacy is well founded. At the same time, there is nothing to be said from the perspective of various theological disciplines against the possibility of exemption from diocesan priestly celibacy. How comprehensive such an opening of the priestly ministry to married men could be, or what steps should be taken on this path, will have to be weighed up wisely. Many faithful would like to see a complete opening. Others advocate taking a more cautious approach. Still others wish to hold on to the status quo on this issue.

We affirm that celibacy is of value. At the same time, there were also traditional lines of justification for celibacy that were motivated by hostility towards the body and sexuality. The idea of cultic purity, for example, is no longer a helpful category. The same applies to economic considerations (right of inheritance with regard to sinecures, etc.). Might it therefore be time to bring a hitherto admittedly weaker line of tradition to the fore, and to reassess the testimony of marriage within the priestly ministry?

We value the growing witness of priestly celibacy. At the same time, the abuse crisis has taught us that obligatory celibacy may attract a disproportionately large number of men who are unsure of their sexuality, of their sexual identity and orientation, and wish to avoid confronting it. The regressive immature type, as a third group of people accused of sexual assault, exhibits these characteristics³. The MHG study concludes from this that it is the obligation to observe celibacy - not celibacy per se - that is liable to promote sexual abuse through these and other constellations⁴.

We therefore see that there are some reasons for an opening of the priestly ministry, and that some of these are significant in nature. At the same time, we wonder whether reality as it

³ Cf. in: "Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference" (MHG study), 282.

⁴ Cf. inter alia in: "Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference" (MHG study), 11; 12-13. This problem indicator is explicitly mentioned there, without offering suggestions for a solution. Other problem areas, such as inadequate personality development, etc., are dealt with in another implementation text of the Forum "Priestly existence today". This must be taken seriously, even though abuse also occurs in non-celibate contexts. This is one potential danger, but by no means the only one.

reveals itself to us may not also be a sign. We see people who long to make use of priestly ministries, and of sacramental ones in particular, while the number of those who can offer this ministry to them is rapidly diminishing in our country. But the Church defines Herself as that which is gathered around the Eucharist as its centre. What if a community no longer has sufficient access to the Eucharist? Is it legitimate and meaningful to argue from a position of shortage? We believe that the shortage of priests is far from being the only reason, and that it is not the only decisive reason, for the desire to abolish obligatory celibacy. But we are inclined to think that the pastoral distress brought about by the shortage of priests should also be taken seriously as a sign of the times. We believe that access to the celebration of the Eucharist, not only to receive communion, as well as access to the sacraments of the anointing of the sick and forgiveness, is to be valued more highly than the obligation to maintain celibacy.

We therefore suggest that the following should be considered for a discernment of spirits:

The Church naturally has the right to establish and impose rules and regulations, and indeed She must do so again and again. Equally, however, She has a duty to consider whether these rules and regulations continue to serve as a witness that facilitates the evangelisation that is so badly needed. The obligation to observe celibacy poses a very real danger that it will only be accepted as a consequence of the choice of vocation. The claim that it is thus understood as a witness can hardly be fulfilled in these cases. Religious report that the reactions to their celibacy are much more positive, precisely because this choice is completely voluntary. The Synodal Assembly is convinced that the abolition of compulsory celibacy will make continence for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven more visible as a "special gift of God" (Can 277), and will enhance its symbolic character for the dawning Kingdom of God.

Just as there is a theological hierarchy of truths, there are also precedences and subordinate orders that must always be newly attained in the organisation of the salvific ministry in the Church. This means that what is intended to be a means to achieve a higher goal must not hinder the achievement of this very goal.

Witnessing salvific reality is dependent on the efficacy of symbolically-mediated reality. We must unfortunately add in our present time: But this is exactly what is endangered, not least by the experiences with celibate priests who abused children. The suffering of the victims clearly speaks for itself! The credibility of the Church, of the priesthood, and of celibacy, has been severely damaged by this.

We therefore reach the conclusion of regarding all these factors as signs of the times that make it necessary to take concrete steps. This results in the following votes:

Motion 1

The Synodal Assembly asks the German Bishops' Conference to launch a pastoral initiative to enhance the awareness of the faithful with regard to the value of evangelical counsels, and thus of the celibate life, for the Church as a whole. This requires coordinated cooperation between all those who are active in the field of faith education at the various levels of the Church in Germany, on the basis of a spirituality that is both theologically responsible and at the same time awake to the dangers. It is also necessary to consider in this context how we as the Latin Church can be enriched by increased reflection on the experiences, challenges and spirituality of married priests within the Eastern Catholic Churches.

Motion 2

The Synodal Assembly asks the Holy Father to also permit the Church of the Latin Rite to confer ordination in accordance with the tradition and practice of some Eastern Catholic Churches with regard to the regulations concerning celibacy⁵. Since this is a serious question, this question could be submitted to a Council.

Motion 3

If, for reasons of prudence, the preceding vote is deemed too far-reaching, the Synodal Assembly asks the Holy Father to consider individual extensions of the existing practice.

We are thinking here for example of the ordination of *Viri Probati*, whereby criteria could be defined as a first step "to ordain as priests suitable and respected men of the community [...] who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate."⁶ Other men could also be considered in our context with comparable criteria, for example pastoral assistants, or also those holding honorary positions.

Particular-church arrangements would also be possible, so that experience could first be gained in one region of the world (possibly even smaller than a local church) as to how such an opening would affect priests who have already been ordained, priests who are to be ordained in the future, and last but not least the faithful.

Another possibility would be dispensations in individual instances, as is the case with married Evangelical pastors who have converted to the Catholic Church. Such dispensations could be granted even more generously (while upholding the general obligation to maintain celibacy). The right to give such a dispensation is currently reserved to the Apostolic See (can. 1047 §2 No. 3). This reservation could be lifted for individual local churches if the respective local bishop so requested. This would require an appropriate intra-diocesan process and consultation with the Bishops' Conference. Should the Apostolic See consent to this, the authority for

⁵ CCEO c. 373: Clerical celibacy chosen for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and suited to the priesthood is to be greatly esteemed everywhere, as supported by the tradition of the whole Church; likewise [!], the hallowed practice of married clerics in the primitive Church and in the tradition of the Eastern Churches throughout the ages is to be held in honour.

⁶ Final Document of the Amazon Synod, 111.

a dispensation would then lie with the local bishop, who is in a better position to assess the situation on the ground.

Motion 4

The Synodal Assembly asks the Holy Father, after any general exemption from the vow of celibacy for future ordinations of priests of the Latin rite, to also give priests who have already been ordained the possibility of being released from the vow of celibacy without having to renounce exercising the ministry.

b) Votes on priests leaving the ministry due to a partnership

Introduction

Every employee or civil servant has to accept negative consequences associated with the premature termination of his/her employment. Not all of these can and must be absorbed by the previous employer. This also applies as a matter of principle to leaving the priestly ministry. That said, from a point of view of justice and legal certainty, this departure, which is more than a professional caesura pure and simple, entails disproportionate disadvantages.

The reasons for leaving are quite varied. A significant majority however have to renounce the priestly ministry because of a partnership. The Synodal Path should distinguish between clergy who leave the priestly ministry for these and other personal reasons, and those who have to leave because of sexual violence or other offences.

Motion 1

The Synodal Assembly asks the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of Catholics to commission a social science study on the situation of suspended and dispensed priests, and to present it to the public no later than two years after the last Synodal Assembly. The aim would be a quantitative and qualitative survey of ecclesiastical, professional and family situations. It would also be important to ascertain the willingness to continue in a pastoral profession, or even to be/become active in the priestly ministry, possibly also in the form of a priest in a secondary profession to be newly created.

Motion 2

The Synodal Path asks the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of Catholics to set up a working group with the aim of giving married priests in all German dioceses approximately the same treatment. It is considered important that the working group include "former" priests. The focus of the working group is to be on taking a compassionate approach (a), and on the legal provisions (b).

- a. Collecting best-practice examples for a way of dealing with suspended and dispensed priests on the part of the dioceses that is convincing in human terms (regular invitations to engage in a joint exchange, forms of involvement in the priests' council and synodal bodies, naming in the schematism, etc.) and handing them over to the dioceses for the desired implementation. The aim is to overcome disenfranchisement and prevent alienation.
- b. Dispensed priests should as a matter of principle be able to take up ecclesiastical vocations that are open to all lay people⁷. Integration into a pastoral ministry should take priority. Binding, legally-secure rules should be developed for all, and orientated towards civil-society standards⁸, as is the case when other pastoral employees leave their posts.

⁷ Cf.: Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany, *Beschluss: Dienste und Ämter* 5.6.2.: "If a priest who has left the ministry wishes to take up a full-time ministry in the Church which is also open to lay people, such posts are to ... be open to him."

⁸ A duty of maintenance on the part of the bishop can be derived from can. 281 §1 and §2 CIC until the dispensation from the obligation of celibacy, requiring that a caring approach be taken towards priests who have left the ministry.