



Letter by Bishop Bätzing
in response to the letter by the Nordic Bishops' Conference
on the Synodal Path

We document the reply written by Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing, President of the German Bishops' Conference, on 28 March 2022 to the Nordic Bishops' Conference:

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies, dear Brothers in Christ, dear Sister Mirijam,

Thank you very much for your letter of 9 March 2022, in which you expressed your solidarity with the Catholics in Germany. We German bishops also feel fraternally united with the Catholics in Northern Europe. At the same time, your letter also expresses your concern with regard to the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany. As much as I appreciate this concern, I would like to offer you a few reassuring and liberating words. It seems to me that the fears expressed and implied do not correspond to the actual deliberations, discussions and decisions of our Synodal Path, which your President, Bishop Czeslaw Kozon, at least partly witnessed himself and to whose Synodal Assembly he has already spoken. However, the Synodal Path is much more than the gathering of all synod members; in the forums, in hearings and not least by bringing in requests for change on the internet platform “Antragsgrün”, an intensive exchange and struggle takes place.

Looking at the texts that emerge from these intensive deliberations, and in particular at the theological orientation text that the Synodal Assembly has since adopted, it is clear that the Synodal Path is precisely on the synodal search for life-giving potential in the life and work of the Church today, to which Pope Francis, as you yourself say, calls the whole Church. Starting from the truly catastrophic and deeply shameful fact of sexual abuse and its cover-up in the midst of the Church, German Catholics are looking for new ways of Church practice with great care and theological foundation. All these reflections and deliberations aim to make room for the Gospel in the life of the Church, to be able to work more freely in the coming of the Kingdom of God again, and thus to create the basis for being able to give an account of the reason for our hope to everyone who asks about it.

Not only the failure of the Church in preventing abuse, but also the active dialogue with the faithful, among others in the past synodal processes, has shown that a simple “business as usual” destroys the Church. We need to turn around and reorient ourselves. Those who are seriously committed to the Synodal Path do not doubt in any way that the *depositum fidei* conveyed by the Church must be embraced unabatedly. For all the freedom of thought and joint reflection, the following applies to the Synodal Path: “At the same time, however, this freedom also calls us to the common responsibility of the faith that has been handed down to us.” (Orientation text No 9)

I would also like to make it clear that the unchangeable and unalterable *depositum fidei* must not be understood in such a way that every ecclesiastical practice, every regulation and every social form of Church, which have been developed in the course of history and under very specific circumstances of time, already represent this unchangeable *depositum*. Many organizational aspects, structures, and also assignments of competence in the Church were formed in response to concrete historical conditions and must then also be the object of change and renewal when they prove obsolete or even obstructive to the proclamation of the Gospel due to changed requirements. The sacramental mystery of the Church is not affected by this, since the following always applies to the Church simultaneously: “It is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, [and] always follows the way of penance and renewal.” (LG 8) These are the changes that the Synodal Path is concerned with, and in its search for new pathways towards this end, it is guided by the key sources of the Faith: Scripture and tradition, the Magisterium and theology, as well as the sense of faith of the faithful and the signs of the times. The certainty of the statements of faith is condensed in the combination of these sources of knowledge.

Looking at the signs of the times naturally also brings to mind your admonition not to “follow the zeitgeist”. I would like to assure you that the Synodal Path always takes this admonition to heart. No one can be interested in frivolously aligning church action towards the prevailing fashions. Nevertheless, the reflections of the Synodal Path, in good ecclesial tradition and in close connection with the statements of the Second Vatican Council, are based on the assumption that God, the Creator and Sustainer of the world, also reveals Himself in this world and in the history of mankind, and that His work and His nature can also be seen in historical events in a condensed form. Of course, not all historical events and developments are equally suitable as such “signs of God”. That is why the Second Vatican Council emphasises that such “signs of the times” are to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel. The signs of the times are therefore to be considered in the canon of the other sources of knowledge of faith. With this in mind, however, they can be genuine sources for the reflection of faith. Not only from Scripture and tradition, theology, the Magisterium and the sense of faith of the faithful can something be learned about God's will for people and for His Church, but also from contemporary events and developments in history, through which the people of God are travelling as pilgrims. “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to

come, and about the relationship of the one to the other.” (GS 4) So, asking for the signs of the times has nothing to do with following the zeitgeist.

Finally, I would like to counter the concern that Catholics in Germany might neglect their integration into the community of the universal Church or even take a special path away from this community. In contrast, I may assure you that in the deliberations and decisions of the Synodal Path very careful differentiation is made as to which changes and reforms can be realized within the framework of the diocesan responsibility of the members of the German Bishops’ Conference and which questions, concerns and reform wishes must be brought into the context of the universal Church, in particular into the synodal journey of the universal Church. It is therefore with great expectations that Catholics in Germany will participate in this synodal journey of the universal Church and voice their experiences, but also their concerns and worries in this process. I do not need to explain to you how closely the Catholic Church in Germany sees herself connected to the one Catholic Church worldwide and how much this Church is a matter of the heart for Catholics in Germany.

With this in mind, I hope that I am able to at least alleviate your concerns. We would like to stay in touch with you and strengthen and intensify the exchange. We are particularly glad to be able to welcome Bishop Czeslaw Kozon as an observer at our synodal assemblies in the future as well. Furthermore, I would be pleased if there were an opportunity for direct exchange when you are in Hildesheim for your Plenary Assembly in autumn.

Let us work together on a Church that is open and close to the people out of being Christ-centred, so that for Christ’s disciples “there is nothing genuinely human that fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (GS 1)! Also in prayer we will remain closely connected to each other.

With cordial greetings and blessings, I remain
Yours sincerely

Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing