



Presentation

of Synodal Forum III

“Women in ministries and offices in the Church”

for the First Reading

at the Second Synodal Assembly (30 September - 2 October 2021)

for the action text

“Exchange of theological argumentation in universal church contexts” (draft file)

The time has come to exchange the controversial theological argumentations put forward in universal Church settings with regard to the participation of women in ecclesial ministries and offices in constructive conversations at international level. The demand for gender equality and gender perspectives is a “sign of the times” which is not only brought to the Church from outside, but also raised by Catholics, due to the Biblical foundation of the Church’s teaching and in view of the charisms of women. Women have been admitted to all ecclesial offices in numerous Churches in recent decades. The Catholic Church encounters them as interlocutors in the ecumenical dialogues, and is challenged to engage with their perspectives. The World Council of Churches has initiated various projects that advocate for gender equality in the Churches. The commitment for the equal rights of women in society, industry and the political arena, and criticism of the increasing violence against women, called for by Pope Francis in *“Fratelli tutti”* (2020)¹, take on ecumenical and universal Church significance in this regard. This “sign of the times” makes a change in the Church’s structures necessary with regard to the “interior” of the Church.

Gender roles have changed radically since the 20th Century. The process of increasing separation between the life of society and that of the Church which is taking place in the Western countries is very much related to the question of the status and voice of women in the Church.

¹ Pope Francis has brought up the violation of the dignity of women at various junctures: cf. *Fratelli tutti* (2019), No. 121 (which calls for equal rights for women and men); No. 227 (recalling experiences of violence and abuse), No. 261 (lamenting suffering in contexts of war or displacement in which women lose their children); No. 277-278 (demanding equal dignity for women and men).

We see the significance of the Synodal Path taken by our local church in Germany for the universal Church as lying essentially in according considerable scope to the "*sensus fidelium*" of the whole people of God, and here especially of women, and taking up questions that were long considered "taboo" in official church documents, and which were frowned upon as "feminism", this still being the case in many regions. These include the clash with gender perspectives in theology, pastoral care and religious instruction, and with admitting women to sacramental office.

Religious instruction at schools and in church educational institutions is predominantly performed by women. Priests and lay people work at theological training institutions in the German-speaking countries - at faculties and institutes. Many women have been appointed as professors in recent years in an international comparison. There has been a solid theological, philosophical and social scientific debate on questions of gender equality and the participation of women in all areas of the Church's life. From a universal Church point of view, the debate on the gender issue and on admitting women to sacramental office is met on the one hand with criticism, and on the other hand this very development is perceived as a sign of hope for the universal Church and for other contexts in which these questions cannot be considered together by theologians and bishops in a similarly open manner as in the German context. This is witnessed by the many voices of the universal Church who are following the Synodal Path in Germany with great interest. It is important for the Synodal Path in Germany to maintain an argumentative exchange in a universal Church context, and also to show that we are willing to learn.

There is a need to take a differentiated look at the gender concept when it comes to questions of women's participation in the Church. The term 'gender' has been widely used in the political arena and in Academia, especially since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995): Development opportunities for women can only be adequately grasped in an interrelation between the different factors of gender, education, cultural impact, social class and economic conditions. Gender perspectives - also in the Church - cannot be defined solely by biological "sex", but all these other factors that have been mentioned need to be taken into account. In this context, gender studies in Catholic theology are derived from critical feminist approaches as well as liberation-theology ones. They are related to the analysis of power structures and with the question of the equitable distribution of opportunities - inside and outside the Church. The question of the participation of women in the Church has to be addressed from a universal Church perspective, whilst taking this research into account. This also becomes clear for instance in the document of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America on women in the history and society of Latin America(2018)². A gender-critical perspective is adopted here with regard to the "invisibility" of the contribution made by women in the transmission of the Christian faith in Latin America, and to their exclusion through a wide variety of forms of violence occurring in society, politics, industry and culture. "Clericalism" and "machismo" are very sharply criticised. At the same time, with regard to family and gender relations, there is an orientation towards official Roman Catholic statements that speak of a

² Cf. Margit Eckholt, Eine „Frauensynode“ einberufen? – ein Vorschlag der Päpstlichen Kommission für Lateinamerika, Redaktion feinschwarz, 14 May 2018, in: <https://www.feinschwarz.net/eine-frauensynode-einberufen-ein-vorschlag-der-paepstlichen-kommission-fuer-lateinamerika/>.

“gender ideology”. Similar ambivalences emerge in the writings and addresses of Pope Francis. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *“Amoris Laetitia”* (2016), he resorts to a differentiation between “sex” and “gender”, and describes the diversity of the realisations of the human condition. He thus takes leave of essentialist gender dualism³. At the same time, however, there is also repeated talk of a “gender ideology”. Recent documents relevant to the universal Church refer quite unambiguously to traditional gender anthropology - the polarity of the female and male genders. The gender concept is criticised because it is said to lead to a dissolution of gender and family relations⁴.

A critical reflection on the “gender perspective” in the context of the universal Church’s argumentation taking place on a scholarly level can distance itself from using the term ‘gender’ in an unreflected, polemical manner, thus improving human dignity and gender equality. Documents such as that drafted by three episcopal commissions from the Argentinian Bishops’ Conference (2018) are ground-breaking here. They explain the terms “sex, gender and ideology”, and introduce differentiations with regard to the use of the term ‘gender’⁵. Gender is described here as a helpful category for cultural analysis. This is an instructive example of the value attaching to a worldwide exchange of theological argumentations on gender equality.

Addressing the questions related to gender equality touches on matters of power and on taboos in a universal Church context. It is a sign of hope, and not only for large numbers of women, that the beginnings of a reform of the Church which was initiated by the Second Vatican Council have now progressed to this topic: In the experience of the Spirit of God, women and men have discovered their power, their individual respective capacities and charisms, with which God has empowered them, in order to stand up today the world over for a Church that proclaims the Gospel.

We understand our deliberations in Forum III of the Synodal Path as a contribution within the worldwide synodal process in which Pope Francis has encouraged us to engage with the topic of “For a synodal Church: community, participation and mission”, and which is to be concluded with the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. Synodal processes have also begun in other regions of the world. We hope that the World Synod of Bishops will trust the *“sensus fidelium”* of the whole people of God on questions of synodality, and will open up a space for women’s experiences of faith, pastoral practices and theological research on an equal footing.

With this in mind, we take up thoughts of Pope Francis. Since the beginning of his Pontificate, he has placed important milestones in his various addresses for a Church that walks a “common path”, that is “journeying together” in all of the diversity of the local church and cultural expressions: “The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third

³ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, 19 March 2016, Bonn 2016 (cited: AL), AL 56: He states that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated”.

⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education, “Male and female He created them”. Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education, Vatican City 2019, in: http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19_0997_INGLESE.pdf.

⁵ Cf. Conferencia Episcopal Argentina, *Distingamos: Sexo, Género e Ideología*, Buenos Aires, 26 October 2018, in: <http://www.familiasecnacional.org.ar/distingamos-sexo-genero-e-ideologia/>.

millennium", as the Pope said in his address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops on 17 October 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."⁶.

When the Pope focuses on "synodality", this is based on the people-of-God ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which lent fresh importance to the "*sensus fidelium*". The whole people of God, clergy and laity, have a "*sensus fidelium*", and the *consensus fidelium* is of central importance in important questions of faith – such as the question of gender equality and the participation of women in ministries and offices in the Church. Pope Francis focuses on synodality because he knows about the divide between faith and life. It is only together, in the "*consensus fidelium*", in listening to the questions and concerns of all the faithful, and also in listening to the different theological positions that are taken up, that the unity of the Roman Catholic Church can be preserved⁷.

Motion:

Forum III (Women in ministries and offices in the Church) herewith submits the following motion to a vote in the Synodal Assembly:

The Synodal Assembly herewith requests the German bishops to clearly call – at local church, European and universal Church level – and in the exercise of their responsibility in the universal synodal process (2021 to 2023), for the thematic aspects of gender equality, gender perspectives, participation by women in the Church's leadership ministries, and in the three forms of sacramental office, to be taken up as topics for consultation, and thereby to recall the consultations on the Synodal Path in the German local church.

This means in concrete terms:

The Synodal Assembly asks the German bishops to advocate for the following at the World Synod of Bishops which Pope Francis has convened for October 2023

1. that the "*sensus fidelium*" of all believers is listened to against the background of the reflections of the Synodal Path and the cited documents from the universal Church; this gives rise to perspectives for the occupation of the worldwide Synodal Process.
2. that it be made possible to address the previous magisterial resolutions on the question of the ministries and offices of women in a constructive manner; in doing so, forms of communication are to be found to ensure that, in the face of different positions, we can continue to journey on the path together and approach the respective other positions with esteem.

⁶ Pope Francis, Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015, at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁷ Cf. on this the document entitled „*Sensus fidei* und *sensus fidelium* im Leben der Kirche. Der Text der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission von 2014, in: Thomas Söding (ed.), *Der Spürsinn des Gottesvolkes. Eine Diskussion mit der Internationalen Theologischen Kommission*, Freiburg/Basel/Vienna 2016, 13-76, Nos. 49-59.

3. that an open approach be taken towards the questions posed by feminist theologies and approaches of gender theory from historiography, psychology or sociology and political science.
4. that the places of encounter already existing in the universal Church be acknowledged, expanded and financed where the voices of women can be heard who are active in different pastoral fields worldwide.
5. that the theological research carried out by women on questions of gender equality and the participation of women in the Church be included on an equal footing in all deliberations and decisions.