



Presentation of

Synodal Forum III

“Women in ministries and offices in the Church”

for the Second Reading at the Fifth Synodal

Assembly (9 - 11 March 2023) for the

implementation text

“Women in sacramental ministry

- Perspectives for the universal church dialogue”

[Voting results in the Forum: 22 Yes, 1 abstention]

Introduction: Arguments in a universal church context

In the context of the universal Church, theological arguments with regard to the participation of women in ministries and offices in the Church are presented and discussed in a controversial way. It is time to exchange insights in professionally qualified conversations at the international level constructively and with mutual respect. This concern is also expressed by voices in many local churches, which have been compiled in the working document for the continental stage of the worldwide synodal process under the title "Enlarge the space for your tent' (*Is 54:2*)" (October 2022). There it is stated: "Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women" (No. 64). The report by the Holy Land Bishop's Conference says: "In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard." (No. 61). Expectations for a new reflection on women's ministries are expressed in the South as well as in the North, in the East as well as in the West of the universal Church. Distinctions in regard to specific issues are called for - also with regard to the diaconate and the ordination of women to the priesthood (cf. No. 64). The implementation text presented here also follows this theological insight.

At theological training centres in German-speaking countries - at faculties and institutes - there has been a solid theological, philosophical and social-scientific debate in recent decades on questions of gender justice and the participation of women in all areas of church life, taking ecumenical aspects into account. In recent years, important studies have been presented on the ministry of the deaconess and on the representation of Christ in the sacramental office. We see the significance of the Synodal Path of our German local Church for the universal Church

essentially in taking up these arguments and considering concrete consequences in the sense of gender justice.

The "sensus fidelium" of the whole people of God, and here in particular that of women, may continue to be given space. In the women's associations and in initiatives of the faithful at the grassroots level, there are voices in every age group that speak out in favour of opening up all ministries to women as well. We therefore submit to the Synodal Assembly a statement on the sacramental diaconate of women and a statement on how to deal with the debate on women's access to the entire sacramental ministry.

Statements

1. Sacramental diaconate of women

The discussion about women's access to the diaconate has been conducted in the German local church on a broad theological and ecclesial basis since Vatican Council II. With the establishment of the permanent diaconate as an independent sacramental ministry with an ordination "unto a ministry of service" (LG 29), the diaconal profile of the Church has been sharpened. The diaconate is understood as a special representation of the diaconal Christ within the framework of the one sacramental salvific ministry of the Church. The biblical writings testify to the activity of deaconesses in the Pauline congregations. The records of early councils document forms for ordaining women deacons in liturgical celebrations. In the Eastern Christian Churches, the office of deaconess has long been preserved and is receiving renewed attention today. In view of the strong presence of women in very many different diaconal areas in voluntary and full-time ministries, the question of a diaconal leadership office for women has arisen in recent years. In view of the ever increasing professionalisation of the various diaconal activities, the danger of a divergence between Caritas and pastoral work must be countered. Diaconal practice is a form of proclamation of the Gospel, and conversely, the proclamation of the Gospel needs to be related to experiences in diakonia.

With the establishment of the office of 'deaconess', the basic charitable activity of the Church can be strengthened, which the Second Vatican Council emphasised as the third essential element of the Church's identity, alongside the task of evangelisation through the proclamation of the Word of God and the liturgical celebration of the sacraments. The Church becomes the Church of Jesus Christ when she makes God's mercy concrete in the footsteps of the "poor Jesus" (LG 8). This diaconal mission of the whole Church should be expressed in the liturgy, for example in the Kyrie, the homily or the intercessions.

Statement in the context of the universal Church:

- The German bishops advocate that the regional bishops' conferences have a say in the appointment of members of papal or curial commissions to advise on questions of the diaconate; the criterion for participation in universal church consultations is specialist theological expertise as well as communicative openness to arguments.
- The German bishops advocate in Rome for the admission of women to the sacramental diaconate for all those particular Churches which desire this on the basis of their pastoral situation.

Statement in the context of the German local church:

At the various levels of the German local church, in the dioceses and associations, in further training events for pastoral staff and in theological training at faculties and institutes, a deeper understanding of the diaconal nature of the Church is sought.

- In scientific-theological research, further research is being done on the diaconate from a sacramental-theological and diaconal-theological perspective. In this regard, special attention is to be paid to the diaconate of women. This concern is taken into account through the establishment of a commission for further work on the subject (cf. point 2.2).
- The work of the "Netzwerk Diakonat der Frau" (Network for the Diaconate of Women) and the courses it runs to qualify women for diaconal leadership ministries will be networked with the training of permanent deacons. Joint training modules are to be considered in order to sharpen the diaconal profile of a gender-just and fraternal Church.

2. Women's access to the whole sacramental ministry

Reflection on the specific nature of the sacramental diaconate of women necessitates a further examination of the threefold sacramental ministry. The Second Vatican Council prepared ways to rethink the diversity of the "ministeria" in this one ordo. The purpose of the Church is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The structure of the Church has to serve this purpose. The exclusion of women from the sacramental ministry requires a justification that is accessible to human reason in respect for the traditional speech of God's action. There are women who experience themselves as called and who, according to public perception and experience, have charisms that also recommend them for leadership in the sacramental ministry. It is necessary to give account to God why the spiritual gifts He has given are not respected in the proclamation of the Gospel. The theological arguments presented so far in the present magisterial documents must therefore be subjected to a critical review in the context of the universal Church, in which the necessary scientific expertise must be obtained. In addition to the theological disciplines, philosophy as well as the cultural, historical and social sciences should also be involved in the process of reflection in view of hermeneutical pre-understanding.

Statement in the universal Church context:

The pastoral considerations and theological research from the context of the German local church will be introduced into the universal church discourse at all levels of the international consultations. It must be structurally ensured that the arguments are taken up in the universal church synodal process initiated by Pope Francis and discussed in intercontinental perspectives.

Statement in the context of the German local church:

- A commission shall be established as a form of an ongoing continuation of the deliberation of the topics of the Synodal Path, which shall deal exclusively with the topic of the sacramental ministry of people of all genders. A scientific level and spiritual concerns in the sense of the proclamation of the Christian Gospel are to be combined. Possible international

attention and exchange in ecumenical dialogue shall be ensured from the beginning through appointments to the Commission. The Commission shall periodically present its findings to the public. The Commission shall stimulate discussion processes on the subject at all levels of church life. The German Bishops' Conference shall endeavour at its levels to ensure that the Commission's activities are received by the universal Church. The aim is a mutual intercultural learning process.

Reasons

Many theologians working in academia - not only in Germany - state that there is a considerable discrepancy between the arguments presented in Roman Catholic doctrinal documents that lead to the exclusion of women from the sacramental ministry and the insights gained on the basis of hermeneutical standards and which are presupposed in the research and teaching of theology.

In the history of the Church, there have been several occasions to reconsider a doctrinal position once taken. The realization of the historicity of the knowledge of a religious truth is just as familiar to theological hermeneutics as the insight that the questioning of the sources of knowledge is always guided by interests. Only an intersubjective exchange of knowledge with the practice of all methods can still be convincing today in view of the complexity of the subject matter.

The Church is credible when she bears witness to God's mercy as a diaconal Church. People of all genders stand alongside those who are in need, who face violence, who are marginalised because of gender, social or ethnic affiliation. Diaconal leadership in the form of the sacramental diaconate exercised by women will contribute to this credibility and raise the diaconal profile of the Church. People of all genders are equally called to diaconal ministry. It is precisely the discussion of a sacramental diaconal ministry for women that offers the opportunity for a fundamental process of reflection on the sacramental structure of the Church. Such a path can also lead to the shaping of new forms of ministries and offices on the way to a fraternal Church.

The new beginning of a period of theological argumentation with regard to the participation of women in the sacramental ministry, which was ventured on the Synodal Path in Germany, has as a prerequisite that the doctrinal texts available up to now have not reached a level of final validity. In the controversy surrounding this question, it should be thought-provoking that a large number of believers in Christ refuse to accept the assumption that only a man can preside over the Eucharistic liturgy because of his natural resemblance to Jesus. The "sensus fidelium" ("sense of faith of the faithful" in the sense of Lumen Gentium 12) cannot err according to the teaching of the 2nd Vatican Council.

It is the biblically attested doctrine that unity with Christ Jesus is grounded in baptism, which abolishes the distinction of "male" and "female" on the level of salvation (cf. Gal 3:28). This results in a distinction, guided by the Holy Spirit, between the divine ground of salvation and the earthly form of the Church that has become historical as the place of experiencing a redeemed existence. The soteriological intention of the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus is the guiding principle of the reflection: in following the Crucified, the God-man Christ Jesus, people give their lives day after day for the proclamation of the Gospel, they strengthen the Easter hope, they heal in spiritual needs and exhort to a life of love even towards those who are hostile.

In their official ministry, they represent Christ Jesus, in that they are called, despite all human weakness, to constantly point to his presence. With their comprehensive spiritual and theological education, they encourage all people through their official proclamation to believe in Christ Jesus, to be baptised, to encounter Jesus Christ in the celebration of the sacraments and to act in a diaconal way.