



**Presentation of the
Synodal Committee for the
Second Reading
At the Fifth Synodal Assembly (9 -11 March
2023) for the preamble text**

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany

As a Synodal Assembly, we are walking along the Synodal Path - stirred by the outcry and lament (Exodus 3:7) of those affected by sexual violence. We walk it as a path of repentance and renewal. We face the criticism and the justified accusation of those affected by abuse of power, sexual violence and its cover-up in the Church. We want to hear and proclaim the Gospel, God's Good News, anew - in words and deeds. Thus, the Synodal Path serves the cause of evangelisation. It is indispensable to openly confess guilt and also to deal with the structural causes of this guilt. Abuse must not be systemically encouraged in the Church. The Church must be a space of non-violence.

We are looking for a way for the Church in this country and in this time. At the same time, the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany is to contribute to the Synodal Journey of the Universal Church, to which Pope Francis has invited all the faithful at Pentecost 2021. In 2019, he encouraged the "pilgrim people of God in Germany" in his letter, „walking together and with the whole Church under the Spirit's light and guidance, to be invaded by the Spirit, to learn to listen and discern the ever new horizon that is always on offer." With this, Pope Francis also links the call to seek "a frank response to the present situation". This is why the Synodal Path takes up pressing questions that are of great importance not only in Germany, but also in other regions of the universal Church.

We entrust our Synodal journey to God and ask for the gift of discernment of spirits to help us walk the path into the future.

1. Where we are:

**in the middle of the crisis, in the middle of the world, in
the middle of the Church**

“The Lord then said: What have you done! Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil! (*Gen 4:10*). With this question God also addresses us. For decades, also members of the Synodal Assembly have not taken sexual violence in our Church seriously enough. We did not sufficiently notice the suffering of those affected, which continues to this day. Even in our Synodal Assembly there are people who have silenced even the quietest and most timid attempts to lament and protest. Others have not believed those affected, thereby causing them additional suffering and preventing them from receiving justice. They have protected the perpetrators and also themselves and have become accomplices in making the institution of the Church appear untouchable. In doing so, they have silenced God Himself in the lives of many people. Only with the scientific MHG study, which researched sexual violence against minors by clergy in the sphere of the German Bishops' Conference, have many eyes and ears opened - far too late and even now not without attempts by those responsible to save themselves and get hold of the interpretative authority over the events.

However, we also see encouraging signs of hope in this grave crisis: the decisive commitment of those affected and of survivors to clarification, reappraisal and change testifies to a trust in the liberating God whom no power in the world can silence for good - not even in His Church. Therefore, the voice of those affected does not only provide helpful advice in a helpless situation. Their voice is the admonishing voice of God on the path of our own evangelisation. They are also the ones that make us aware once again of many other problems that obscure the Good News in our Church and severely hinder her mission in the secular environment: the spiritual abuse, the abuse of power through clericalism and incompetence, the disregard for women and for people who do not conform to the binary order of male and female, and last but not least, life-hostile constrictions of the Church's sexual morality. The four central themes and fields of action of the Synodal Path are dedicated to these urgent questions.

As Synod members, we stand with our guilt and need, with our hope and our faith in the midst of a world that is itself shaken by serious crises. It is all the more important that the Church faces up to the questions of the time and that she does not give the impression of already having all the answers or of looking down on each other's doubts, weaknesses and mistakes. Together with the people of today, she is in search of perspectives inspired by the faith in God

The personal as well as systemic dimensions of sexual violence have drastically increased the loss of trust in the Church in the world. And yet many people still expect something from this Church. They expect a community of believers who, in following Jesus, are committed to humanity; who turn especially to those who are distressed and in need; who, where necessary, lend them their voice and let them have their say; who build bridges between the many hostile camps and therein share their hope for a better future. Therefore, the Synodal Path must also lead to a culture of conversation that is characterised by mutual respect and love of one's neighbour, because violence and abuse already begin with the language used. This means a resolute rejection of any kind of hateful and contemptuous communication, which numerous members of the Synodal Assembly also have to suffer.

The Church is a Church with guilt and failure. She will only do justice to her mission if she engages with people and their everyday world. Pope Francis writes: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 49).

We are a part of this Church because faith in God, hope in Jesus Christ and communion in Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist unite us with all believers in the Catholic Church, across all boundaries that separate people from one another. The unity of people among themselves, given and entrusted by God, is always threatened. It is the task of the Church to be “a sacrament or a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen gentium* 1). Therefore, she must take seriously Jesus’ mandate to make peace (*Matt.* 5:9). Many things in society as well as in the Church are striving apart and have to be painstakingly brought together. Because the Church is not only holy, but also sinful, she must never carry out her tasks in an attitude of superiority, but always in humility.

It is contrary to God’s spirit to impose unity in an authoritarian way. Even if such a path may be tempting for some, it is and remains a temptation that the Church must not give in to. It is necessary for the Church to engage with what is different and strange. It is precisely these encounters that hold out the hope of discovering essential traces that point to God’s hidden presence and thus show the way to the future. All the more painful is the experience that outspoken speech and reflection are quickly placed under the general suspicion of division and loss of tradition. We rely on the encouragement of the Apostle Paul: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil”. (*1 Thess.* 5:19-22).

2. Where we come from: with our experiences, with our disappointments, with our hopes

In the Synodal Assembly we come together with different experiences, with disappointments and with great hopes. Many of us are young and know the arguments about the way of the Church in the last decades only from hearsay; they get involved so that in the future they may be Catholic with a clear conscience. Others have been involved for a long time; they draw a mixed balance of what has succeeded and failed. Quite a few people have turned their backs on the Church because they have been disappointed or hurt by her or because they have no use for her any more. All too often they have been labelled apostate, half-hearted or opportunistic. But it is important to look at their struggles, their search and their faith and to seek a dialogue with them anew.

The Synodal Path would be on the wrong track if the expertise of those affected by sexual violence were not brought in and their voices were not listened to carefully in its midst.

We are grateful that members of the Advisory Council of those affected by sexual violence at the German Bishops’ Conference are involved and committed to the Synodal Path.

Our self-understanding includes the experience of a democratic society in which human rights are valid. Our church experience is shaped by the Second Vatican Council, even if most of us have not experienced it ourselves. We want to be Church “today”, with the energy of the Bible, with the staying power of tradition, but also in decisive contemporaneity here and now. Being

united with the Pope and with the Church throughout the world opens up a richness of unity that does not consist in the monotony of eternally identical repetitions, but in the vitality of a cohesion of very many people who bring their different gifts, their strengths and weaknesses into the community of faith. Unity is a dynamic quantity that cannot be lived at all without diversity. We share Pope Francis' concern that those in authority in the Church frequently act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators (*Evangelii gaudium* 47). God is close to everyone, inside and outside the Church. Spreading this message is the mission of the Church.

The Catholic Church in Germany has followed a path of renewal that has led from the Second Vatican Council to the Würzburg Synod and the Dresden Pastoral Synod. The different challenges have required different issues. Today, many problems remain unresolved and new ones have been added. Quite a few resolutions have still not been implemented. The proposals of that time cannot simply be repeated today because the situation has changed. But the Synodal Path follows the tradition of synodal processes, which are also today taking place in many parts of the Catholic Church worldwide, in order to make the Church a place of faith and freedom for the people.

Pope Francis stresses: "The present questions, as well as the answers we give, demand a long fermentation of life and the collaboration of a whole people for years." (Letter by Pope Francis to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany, here with reference to Yves Congar). The Catholic Church in Germany is on this path and continues to walk it. It is a path marked by great hope and joy, but also by deep disappointments. For no courageous steps of reform have been taken for decades. We therefore share the Pope's intention to go forth as a Church and to strengthen synodality (*Evangelii gaudium* 32). We want to be able to proclaim the message of the Gospel in such a way that we do justice to the people in their respective life worlds. We share the conviction that the Catholic faith has the power to recognise the signs of the times, to interpret them in the light of the Gospel and to act accordingly.

We are convinced that the crisis of the Church, which is evident in the crimes of sexualised violence and their cover-up, is not the end of the Church, despite the heavy guilt. Even in this deep crisis of faith there is the chance of conversion and a new beginning. The Catholic Church has lost credibility in many areas, which she hopes to regain. This can only happen through a change which, in addition to a changed attitude, also takes institutional modifications into consideration. Much can be learned from the spirituality and experiences gathered in religious orders and spiritual communities. The commitment of Catholic associations and organisations is a source of inspiration. The close relations with the universal church, which are not least deepened by the church relief agencies, are important.

3. Where we want to go: to the lives of people, to the places of faith, to the points of rupture in society.

The goal of the Synodal Path is to listen anew to the Gospel of liberation. Only those who perceive God's voice in the cry of the poor for justice (*Matt.* 5:3-12) and in the silent groaning of the maltreated creature (*Rom.* 8:22) can dare to stand up for God full of hope, despite all guilt, and for that very reason also for their neighbours.

Pope John Paul II has taught us: "Man is the way for the Church" (*Redemptor hominis* 14). Therefore, the Church must find the way of the people and not determine the ways of the people. She is needed where fractures and wounds mark people's lives. She must be of service to people.

In order to do justice to what the MHG study analyses as systemic causes of sexual violence and how to deal with it, the German Bishops' Conference has asked the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) to jointly pursue a synodal path. It has proposed three topics for this: power and the separation of powers, the way of life of priests and the Church's sexual teachings. At the suggestion of the ZdK, the topic "Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church" was added. The consultation of the local churches at the worldwide synodal process of the Catholic Church has shown that the four topics are significant everywhere.

There are, of course, many more issues that need to be deliberated and decided in a synodal way in the Catholic Church. Each topic requires decisions that can be taken in Germany, with a specific responsibility of the bishops for their dioceses. However, all topics also raise questions that cannot be decided in Germany alone, because they concern the Catholic Church as a whole. Due to the worldwide situation of sexual abuse by members of the clergy, worldwide systemic changes are also needed. We would like to contribute to this with the Synodal Path in Germany. Clear votes are needed in this regard so that the universal Church can hear our voice, the voice of the Catholic Church from Germany, just as we listen to the voices from the universal Church in the Synodal Assembly. The critical accompaniment of the public is also important. We want to be part of a learning Church on a spiritual path that brings together all the faithful.

We share Pope Francis' commitment to being a synodal Church. In a synodal Church, all are aware of their mission and have a say in setting the course for the future: In a synodal Church, all believers see themselves as people who listen to God, to His Word and to other people. In a synodal Church, the signs of the times are interpreted together. In a synodal Church, a balance is struck between necessary unity and legitimate diversity. In a synodal church there is a spiritual process of reflection and discernment that leads to binding decisions.

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany is also a learning process of synodality. Synodality "is a constitutive element of the Church" (Pope Francis, Address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops). And at the same time, it is a *modus operandi* that the Church must rediscover and practise in this time. On this path, not everything succeeds at once and immediately. An important task is therefore to stay on this path together. Simple forecasts for the Church will not help. We are talking about a future that is open to surprising turns and developments, full of trust in Jesus' promise that God's Spirit will guide his Church "to all truth" (*John*, 16:13).