



## Presentation

of the Synodal Forum IV

“Life in succeeding relationships

- Living love in Sexuality and Partnership”

for the First Reading

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

for the implementation text

“Blessing ceremonies for couples who love each other”

[Voting result in the Forum: 18 Yes, 4 No]

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## Introduction

The Forum “Life in succeeding relationships” presented a basic text that regards loving relationships that base on a personal meaning system to the Synodal Assembly. Couples who are united in love, who treat each other with full respect and dignity, and who are prepared to live their sexuality for the long term with care for themselves, for each other and in social responsibility, deserve recognition, encouragement and support.

There are couples who want to commit themselves and who ask for the blessing of their partnership. This request is based on the gratitude for experienced love and the request for an accompanied future. It is an expression of a relationship with God either of one or of both partners.

## Proposal

The Synodal Assembly calls on the bishops to officially allow blessing ceremonies in their dioceses for couples who love each other and want to commit themselves, but to whom sacramental marriage is not accessible or who do not want to enter into it. This also applies to same-sex couples on the basis of a re-evaluation of homosexuality as a normal variant- of human sexuality.

- The German dioceses introduce such a blessing ceremony as a diocesan liturgy.
- The German dioceses present a blessing form for this purpose. They can draw on the preparatory work of various dioceses, the Working Group for Catholic Family Education (AKF), the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and relevant practical experience.
- The Synodal Assembly proposes that a Manuale for corresponding liturgies be drawn up for such ceremonies of blessing and later included in the Benedictionale, which is to be revised.
- The Manuale contains a pastoral-theological introduction and pastoral-practical tips and should be used in practice. These tips serve as reassurance and facilitate the implementation. The Manuale includes suggested forms for blessing ceremonies, which are different from marriage ceremonies, within the framework of services of the word or the Eucharist.
- Analogous to other celebrations, such a celebration may be presided over by persons with an episcopal commission to worship, in addition to priests and deacons.
- In order to be able to organise such a blessing in a safe and appropriate way, further training is suggested. For an appropriate training curriculum, as well as material and literature references, preliminary work of various dioceses and the work of the AKF can be used.
- No pastor who conducts such a blessing ceremony will face disciplinary consequences in Germany. An obligation to lead such a ceremony is not imposed on anyone.
- For all couples, preparatory talks with pastors and, if necessary, seminars are planned. The joint life situation can also be taken into account here.
- The Manuale is prepared within half a year and will then come into use in Germany.
- The Manuale will be reviewed five years after its first official use. During this time, experience with this practice will be gathered and evaluated for the Church in Germany.

## Reasons

Many people long for commitment and love in binding partnerships. They choose to express commitment in their relationship in different ways. Some enter the path of marriage. Some couples cannot or do not want to enter into marriage, but long for God's blessing on their loving union.

It has become a common experience in pastoral practice that same-sex loving couples ask for a blessing for their partnership. So do civilly remarried divorcees who dare to make a new start in a new partnership. Couples who do not yet consider themselves ready for the sacrament of marriage also do so. They often want to meet the interests of a partnership in which only one partner is a believer or is close to the Catholic Church. Experiences also show that unbaptised couples increasingly ask for the blessing.

A blessing for these partnerships is not currently provided for, as the explanatory note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recently confirmed. Nevertheless, this request is granted in many German-speaking local churches. The decision to bestow this blessing is there-

fore made by the pastors according to their conscience and in many cases in conflict with doctrinal guidelines. This situation of ambiguity and inconsistency is clarified, secured and liturgically regulated with the present decision.

The refusal to bless two people who want to live their partnership in love, commitment and responsibility to each other and to God proves to be merciless or even discriminatory in a society that has achieved human dignity and free self-determination as maxims of moral standardisation. This is all the more serious because such a refusal cannot be convincingly justified in terms of the theology of grace. This not only burdens the proclamation of God's human kindness and the double commandment of love of neighbour and God, but also poses serious questions for the credibility of liturgical action in our cultural sphere. In this context, reference can be made to the Relation Finalis of the Synodal Assembly of 2015 and to the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (19 March 2016): "Christian marriage [...] is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life and are consecrated by the sacrament. [...] Some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way. The Synod Fathers stated that the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage." (AL 292)

The subject of this resolution is a blessing ceremony. This celebration is different from a marriage ceremony. There are sufficient liturgical possibilities to avoid an analogy to marriage. The blessing enhances what already exists in the couple relationship in terms of love, commitment and responsibility. God's support is requested and promised for the future of all that is good.

Extensions in the area of acts of blessing are supported by the explanations in the booklet produced by the Liturgy Commission of the German Bishops' Conference on liturgy-related celebrations "Christus in der Welt verkünden" (Announcing Christ in the World) and derived from the Benedictionale. In the Benedictionale, Introduction No. 36 opens up the possibility of adaptation, and Benediction 99 provides a template that can be adapted to a wide variety of situations.

The offers of blessing ceremonies are based on the conviction that there is moral value in the common life of couples who live together in commitment and responsibility for each other. This also applies to newly founded partnerships where a desire for lifelong fidelity has not been fulfilled before.

Where faith is involved, what is good is worthy of blessing. The Church is enriched by the love of these couples. Such mutual love calls for a blessing. God is present where people love each other.

The offer of a blessing ceremony is based on a primal human need: "People are in need of blessings. They long for salvation, protection, happiness and fulfilment in their lives. That is why people speak blessings to each other. Above all, they hope for and ask blessings from God". (Benedictionale No. 1) This request for and hope of blessing is already of great relevance and it shows a longing for God that must be taken seriously. A blessing expresses that people want to shape their relationship in the horizon of God and orientate themselves on the Gospel. Strengthened by the blessing, these couples make their Christian faith and their relationship with God fruitful in their partnership, in their families, among friends and in their congregations, and sow

the seeds for further blessings in and for our Church. In order to fulfil the mission of the Church to proclaim God's promise in the contemporary world, new liturgical forms must be found at all times. The Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* explicitly encourages the development of liturgical forms, even on a regional basis (cf. SC 22 § 2 and 63).

The blessing ceremonies presented are an example of such inculturation. The assessment of the diversity of lasting relationships and the mutual responsibility perceived in them has changed in Germany. Partnerships that are binding and loving are met with a high level of social acceptance - irrespective of a previous union or the gender of the two partners. This esteem must also find a vivid expression in the liturgy of the Church. So, the Church fulfils her mission "of scrutinizing the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4).

It is not uncommon for same-sex couples and remarried divorcees to experience exclusion and devaluation in our Church. The possibility of publicly placing their partnership under God's blessing does not make up for these experiences. However, it offers the Church the opportunity to show appreciation for the love and values that exist in these relationships and thus to ask for forgiveness and make reconciliation possible.

The blessing is a sign for many couples and their children to be accepted in this Church and it is an encouragement for the congregations to welcome them.