



How can we be a synodal Church on mission?

Summary of the reflection reports from the German (Arch)Dioceses against the background of the synthesis report of the 2023 Synod session and in preparation for the 2024 Synod session

Initiated by the letter “Towards October 2024” issued by the General Secretariat of the Synod on 11 December 2023, Catholics in the German (arch)dioceses and also in the Catholic associations have dealt with the ideas and perspectives presented by the synthesis report of the 2023 Synod session and sent corresponding reports to the German Bishops' Conference. As far as possible within the limited time available, these reflection reports were compiled and discussed in the synodal structures and committees of the respective local churches. These reflection reports, the perspectives of the Synodal Path in Germany, the consultations at the level of the German Bishops' Conference and the impulses of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) form the basis of the following summarised reflections, which focus in particular on which aspects of the Synodal Path in the universal Church to date have proven to be particularly inspiring and fruitful in the local churches on the way to an even more strongly synodal Church of mission and which perspectives are associated with particularly high hopes for the future Synodal Path. In this way, our report aims not only at looking back, but also at looking forward, in particular to the 2024 Synod session, from which we hope to gain further helpful impetus.

The Gospel and synodality

At the same time, the loss of the self-evident Christian character that believers everywhere in Germany feel makes it more obvious that attachment to the Church is not simply a part of a comfortable lifestyle, but that the message of salvation of the risen Lord Jesus Christ is at its centre. It is important to allow this Gospel to take hold of us again and again, to give it space in our own lives and in the life of the Church and to proclaim it to the people. The synodality that needs to be developed is seen in close connection with this mission: “A synodal Church of mission is characterised by the fact that this mission is really focused on and, in a living relationship with God, the question is always asked as to what He is calling His Church to do today.” (Diocese of Fulda) Synodality, which is

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the task of the Church in the 21st century, should empower her to accomplish this better. Every aspect of synodality is thus related to the Gospel.

At this point, it is not possible to describe the multitude of missionary, pastoral, diaconal, charitable and solidarity initiatives, institutions, approaches and commitments that the reports from the dioceses speak of. They bear eloquent witness to how many believers in Germany, even in these times, continue to see Christian commitment as being identical with a commitment to solidarity and humanity in the spirit of the Gospel. The diocese of Würzburg's words on pastoral care and charity are as follows: "Both are related to each other in that we strive for charitable pastoral care and pastoral charity." (Diocese of Würzburg)

Catholics in Germany are unanimously convinced that the Church needs a process of reform and renewal in order to fulfil her mission. "Being Church' in a synodal way is not questioned at any point. [...] Across all feedback, there is a realisation that there is an urgent need for change in the Church." (Archdiocese of Cologne) This realisation characterises all reports and reflections on synodality "– in fidelity to the message of Jesus and with a keen eye for the signs of the times, firmly rooted in the tradition of the Church and at the same time openly listening to the work of the Holy Spirit in the present, integrated into the communion of the universal Church and at the same time inculturated in our Western European socio-cultural context". (Diocese of Speyer)

Synodality as practised by the local churches

The (arch)dioceses in Germany are not just at the beginning of the realisation of synodality. Even if the concept of synodality has only recently become established in this form and its scope of meaning is sometimes not yet considered to be precisely defined, the reports issued by the (arch)dioceses testify to a practice of what synodality means that has been growing for several decades. The Würzburg Synod was certainly a formative event in this regard: "The joint co-responsibility for the mission of the Church was established at the Würzburg Synod (1971–1975)." (Archdiocese of Munich and Freising) From there, committees for joint consultation and in certain cases also for decision-making were established in the local churches at all levels from the parish to the bishops' conference, which have endured to this day and which have clearly proven themselves overall, because "synodal attitudes and approaches alone are not enough, participatory structures are also required in order to be able to bear joint responsibility". (Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart) The reports refer unanimously, as a matter of course and with a positive basic tone to these committee structures, which are an integral part of the Church in Germany. "We have made positive experiences with participatory processes in complex financial and pastoral structural issues and are shaping a good co-operation between full-time and voluntary workers and consecrated and non-consecrated people." (Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart) The diocese of Münster states: "The meetings of the diocesan council are characterised by a democratic, open and fair atmosphere that enables all members to contribute their opinions and perspectives." (Diocese of Münster)

As regards financial administration in particular, the committees also work on the basis of state-church law. To a large extent, these bodies are legitimised through democratic elections. The exact regulations and structures differ from local church to local church. The co-determination modalities also vary between a purely advisory, a more strongly recommendatory and a clearly decision-making character. It is clearly noticeable that both the consultations and resolutions of the Synodal Path in Germany and the synodal path of the universal Church have triggered an impulse in all local churches. This impetus has led to reflection on the function, working methods and the possible and necessary renewal of committee work in the Church. “The Synodal Path has shown a process of successful changes in cooperation, in attitude, in open dialogue and in the willingness to learn from one another.” (Archdiocese of Bamberg) Particularly in view of the committee structures, the local churches are concerned with the question of how synodality can be expressed more strongly, organised more vividly and reflected upon in greater depth. “What could a self-commitment of the bishop or accountability to participative committees in certain areas look like? How can competences in the common mission through baptism and confirmation – also under canon law – be strengthened and increased?” (Diocese of Passau)

The way in which the joint dialogue is conducted is also reflected upon. In particular, the method of the World Synod provides impetus to strengthen the spiritual dimension in the meetings, so that it can be stated “that there is now a ‘taste’ for this method of ‘conversation in the Holy Spirit’ that [...] conveys hope”. In the diocese of Münster, for example, “this method is seen as a great help in finding a solution in a good spiritual process to the difficult questions that we also have to solve in the diocese of Münster for the future in pastoral care”. (Diocese of Münster) Other dioceses have had good experiences with the so-called consensus method. This “aims at ‘objection-free’ resolutions in which the majority does not decide, but all serious objections must be integrated into the final decision”. (Diocese of Aachen) There are often reports of the difficulties of recruiting people to work in these participation structures, of qualifying them accordingly, of giving young people and women better access to this commitment and of involving people from different milieus and groups in general. Those responsible ask themselves “how it can be possible to win over believers to continue to participate in the existing synodal structures”. (Diocese of Görlitz) However, there is also the realisation: “At the same time, people will continue to get involved where they feel themselves and their service to be effective and valued and where their commitment is experienced as meaningful.” (Diocese of Görlitz) Here, synodality is often seen as an impulse of hope and an impetus for a new beginning for committed cooperation. “After reading the synthesis report, this connection has become even clearer to us, because a synodal Church is ultimately about involving as many believers as possible, involving them in consultation and decision-making and integrating the leadership offices at the various levels into the synodal community.” (Diocese of Essen)

In some dioceses, new synodal bodies are therefore being set up in which different groups and structures come together on a synodal basis; in other dioceses, the existing bodies are being reviewed to see whether it is possible to advise and make decisions in a more synodal manner.

Considerations regarding a synodal participation structure at the level of the Bishops' Conference are also part of this process. The mutual enrichment of the most diverse forms of synodal participation will have to be emphasised at all levels. It can be said that, despite the crisis-ridden and problematic nature of the Church's situation, many believers still show the courage to make new beginnings and a willingness to get involved, despite frustrating experiences gained in the past. The perspective resulting from the tendency of the whole Church to listen to each other in a synodal way and to take the experiences and *sensus fidei* of the faithful seriously has a noticeable effect here.

Loss of importance and crisis of confidence

The situation of the Church in Germany is deeply characterised by an increasingly noticeable loss of importance of Christianity. For the majority of people in Germany, religion hardly has any explicit significance for the organisation of their daily lives. The recently published representative church membership survey (KMU) shows a clear shift here. For the first time, less than half of German citizens belonged to the Protestant or Catholic Church in 2023. The study also reveals a frightening scenario: trust in the Catholic Church has shrunk by two thirds over the past 40 years, with only 40 per cent of Catholics feeling connected to their Church. And above all: only 32 per cent of Catholic church members agree with the statement: "I believe that there is a God who has made Himself known in Jesus Christ." So not even a third share the central message of Christianity. While this represents an overall situation for the West German dioceses, some of which have yet to learn how to deal with, the East German dioceses already have more experience with this type of marginalisation of the Church: "The essential question is first and foremost the question of God. Most people here do not believe in the existence of God, so fundamental theological considerations and insights are relevant." (Diocese of Erfurt)

A very significant factor contributing to a clear acceleration of these developments is the crisis triggered by the findings of sexualised violence and its cover-up in the Church. More than half a million people left the Catholic Church in Germany in 2022. According to the Religion Monitor, one in four church members thought about leaving the church in 2022. One in five expressed a firm intention to leave. Among the factors cited for this, the loss of trust plays a strong role. At the same time, 92 per cent of those intending to leave agreed with the statement that "you can be a Christian without a Church". The Church is increasingly under pressure to prove her positive significance not only for life, but also for faith. In order to achieve this, new beginnings are needed in the Church. The Church Membership Survey says as much: In view of the fact that loyalty to the Church is becoming ever weaker, 96 per cent of Catholics in Germany believe that the Catholic Church must change fundamentally if she is to have a future.

The Synodal Path in Germany, on which the Church in Germany has embarked since 2020, takes up this perspective in order to open up a future for faith and the Church in Germany. "In our view, the 15 resolutions of the Synodal Path also have the potential to strengthen the necessary conditions for a 'synodal Church on mission'. The substantive work of the Synod on synodality and the resolutions of the Synodal Path, including the ongoing discussions of the

German Bishops' Conference in Rome, thus all contribute to a 'synodal Church on mission'." (Archdiocese of Paderborn)

Participation

Participation is the central subject of any study of synodality. "A synodal Church is a Church that does not exclude, but is open to people and their concerns." (Diocese of Magdeburg) It is about involving many people, involving them in deliberation and decision-making, integrating the leadership offices at the various levels into the synodal community, opening up more opportunities for women in particular to participate, inviting the poor and those on the margins of the Church and strengthening the "we" in the Church. In the reflections, it becomes clear that facilitating participation and advertising participation is anything but easy given the crisis situation: "At the same time, we repeatedly come up against a field of tension between rising expectations of participation on the one hand and simultaneous signs of exhaustion in voluntary services on the other." (Archdiocese of Hamburg)

At the same time, however, it is clear that only a Church that enables participation for many, and especially for those who are marginalised in some way, can develop an appeal that has an impact. "It therefore remains a challenge for the Church to visualise the diversity of the environment in which Catholics live. This applies even more to making contact with people who have had little or no experience of faith in the context of the Church." (Diocese of Aachen)

Synodality is not just the way the Church communicates but it is also a structural aspect of participation. The aim here is to further develop suitable assembly formats and forms of participation that are compatible with the hierarchical and sacramental basic structure of the Church, and to advance the basic episcopal order of the Church in a synodal manner. Synodality must be developed as an independent *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church. For Catholics in Germany, parallels and points of contact with state, in particular democratic, forms of participation are not a negative criterion. The linking of decisions taken by the respective officials to the deliberations and resolutions of synodal bodies, a culture of accountability, a synodal endeavour to achieve extensive unanimity and also a more participatory and synodal practice in the appointment of leadership positions are aspects that are part of the virulent development process of synodality in Germany. It remains "a task to further develop the basic synodal principles of listening, accepting the positions of others, the element of silence and the path of decision-making". (Diocese of Hildesheim)

Opportunities for women to participate

Catholics in Germany are generally convinced that significantly greater opportunities for women to participate are an absolutely essential aspect of the renewal of the Church. "Equal participation in church life, leadership and decision-making authority is perceived as a touchstone of how seriously participation for all is being strived for. It was frequently mentioned that gender equality is long overdue and that women should not be put off any longer." (Diocese of Augsburg)

A higher proportion of women in leadership positions is sought on all sides, in some cases also through quota regulations. There is also an urgent desire for the sacramental diaconate to be opened up to women and for the discussion about the possibility of admitting women to ordination to the priesthood to be continued. Young women in particular are asking for a specifically female perspective in the proclamation of faith and also in the pastoral care of the Sacraments. These issues are closely linked with the future perspectives of the Church. “Encouraged by the results of the deliberations during the continental phase and by the synthesis report (Chap. 9) women wish for more opportunities to participate. Concrete points are the admission of women to the diaconate, equal access to leading positions, offering extreme unction, preaching ministry as well as admission to theological training centres.” (Archdiocese of Berlin)

Women’s associations also emphasize the issue of abuse of adult women which requires more attention: “Pastoral care and administration of the Sacraments always happen in an asymmetrical context. For example, perpetrators may be persons of authority as priests or members of religious orders whereas the individuals calling on pastoral care open themselves and thus become vulnerable.” (KDFB)

Unity, diversity, inculturation

Synodality goes hand in hand with the discovery and the esteem of the wealth produced by diversity in the Church. “It is a priority task to bring diversity to life as a creative and furthering factor within dialogue and the development of the Church.” (Diocese of Limburg) This diversity which has to be developed positively in the unity of the Church is connected with the significance of faith and Church in the concrete lives of the people. “The Church’s mission always is happening in a concrete space and a concrete time and is therefore dependent on a context. [...] Social situations are ‘signs of the time’ which have to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel (see GS 4). These situations include economic circumstances as well as demographic and political developments, peoples’ attitudes towards life, the culture of cooperation, etc.”(Archdiocese of Freiburg) The indispensable inculturation of the Gospel requires a salutary decentralisation within the Church, in a way that the local churches and local church associations, especially the bishops’ conferences, are granted more significance and more authority to act to shape the one common faith in the diversity necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel. “Despite numerous pastoral issues identified worldwide during the Synod a higher level of decision-making authority for the respective local churches would be helpful. They could react more specifically and faster to current challenges which would also strengthen the position of the individual bishop.” (Diocese of Mainz) This poses no threat to the unity of the Church: “Without crossing the ‘red line’ of a worldwide common doctrine of faith and ethics, there has to be a corridor where the local churches may be active and develop themselves.” (Diocese of Eichstätt)

Tradition and dynamics

The Gospel can only be proclaimed to the people in their specific time and their historical situation if the transmission of tradition happens in a dynamic way. “The tradition of our faith resembles a river whose water is fed from different sources but still comes from the depths of the earth – and then always remains in motion.” (Diocese of Essen) Tradition must always be adapted to the respective times if it is not to be musealised or ossified and ultimately die out. “Since the spiritual and existential needs of people have changed greatly and continue to change, we see it as our task to better understand contemporary culture and to seek new fits between the existential needs of contemporary people and the message of the Gospel.” (Diocese of Fulda)

The interaction of the sources of the knowledge of faith, the scrutinising view of the hierarchy of truths and the interpretation of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel are indispensable for this. This also includes a learning dialogue with the sciences, such as the human sciences, when it comes to keeping anthropological findings and doctrinal statements epistemically up to date. The task here is seen as “better understanding contemporary culture and seeking new fits between the existential needs of contemporary people and the message of the Gospel.” (Diocese of Fulda)

Ecumenism

For Catholics in Germany, the question of greater efforts towards ecumenism and more significant progress in the common faith and actions of the churches is an important and frequently mentioned topic. Under the heading “What are the key issues and topics here?”, the diocese of Würzburg, for example, cites the following: “How can we work together more ecumenically?” (Diocese of Würzburg)

Eucharistic hospitality in marriages between denominations is mentioned again and again. After multiple consultations in the German Bishops' Conference, many dioceses have recommended the 2018 pastoral guidance entitled “*Walking with Christ – tracing unity. Inter-denominational marriages and sharing in the Eucharist*”. The diocese of Osnabrück also encourages “Eucharistic hospitality on ecumenically 'dense' occasions as a step on the path to further growing Christian community and thus to fulfil the self-commitment of the *Charta Oecumenica* to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith”. (Diocese of Osnabrück)

Reference is also made to the potential that ecumenism represents for the further development of synodality. In particular, the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops' Conference suggests that the evaluation and reception of the feedback already received from the ecumenical community on Pope John Paul II's call to enter into a dialogue on the form of the exercise of papal primacy in the service of unity (UUS, nos. 95 and 96) should be accelerated in order to

obtain impulses for the connection between papal primacy and synodality within the common mission of the Church.

Structures of abuse

“Terrible crimes were committed under the guise of religion and faith.” (Diocese of Essen) The long road to reconciliation and justice in the face of the sexual violence that has occurred in the Church on an alarming scale and its cover-up requires the Church to address the structural conditions that enable abuse and that must be corrected. “We want to consistently listen to the voices of those who are affected by abuse of power and sexualised violence. It is therefore also our duty to change all structures that have favoured these terrible crimes.” (Diocese of Essen)

Transparency, accountability, accountability of decisions, the involvement of women in management tasks, the avoidance of informal structures, improved communication and broader participation also have a preventive character with regard to structures that promote abuse.

Concretising

The discussion about synodality must not stop at the fundamental and general, but must take on a concrete form in the Church at all levels. This also includes dealing with the topics that are specifically on the minds of the synod members. The World Synod since 2021 and the synthesis report of the General Assembly in October 2023 have made it clear that the questions of the Synodal Path in Germany are being asked in a comparable way in many places in the universal Church. It is therefore a particular concern of Catholics in Germany to bring these topics into the discourse of the universal Church, as they did at the 2023 Synod meeting, again and again and especially with regard to the 2024 Synod meeting and the planned working groups on individual topics, and to represent the positions developed along the Synodal Path in Germany. The topics to be named in this regard are in particular:

- the responsible and synodally-bound handling of leadership authority;
- strengthening the aspect of the separation of powers in the Church;
- the stronger implementation of accountability of ministers;
- greater participation of the people of God in the selection of ministers;
- the admission of lay people to the preaching ministry;
- the review of the celibacy obligation of priests;
- the access of women to leadership positions;
- better integration of women in theological and pastoral training;
- the opening of the diaconate to women;
- the discussion about the stipulations in the doctrinal letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*;
- the further development of the Church's teaching on anthropology;
- the further development of the Church's sexual doctrine;
- the integration of LGBTQ+ people into the Church.

Outlook

The Catholic Church in Germany had already begun her Synodal Path when Pope Francis had not yet issued his invitation to the universal Church to embark on a common Synodal Path. The synod members in Germany have repeatedly orientated themselves towards the letter that Pope Francis had addressed to the pilgrim people of God in Germany. In the course of both Synodal Paths, a convergence has become increasingly clear from different starting points, in which the two initiatives mutually reinforce and affirm each other. Many of the reflections in the synthesis report have helped us to analyse and weigh up perspectives and to link our intentions even more closely with the universal church community. A closing statement from the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising is very apt here: “At the end of our response, we would like to express our sincere thanks once again for the entire process at the various levels of the Church. We believe that listening to each other and establishing new forms of decision-making as part of this process and beyond can really make a lasting difference. In our view, these aspects are of central importance in ensuring that the dimension of the common mission becomes more tangible again and that the power of the Gospel can radiate even more clearly.” (Archdiocese of Munich and Freising)

With this in mind, Catholics from Germany are looking forward with hope to the Synod session that will take place in Rome in October 2024.