



Introduction
by Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing,
President of the German Bishops' Conference,
at the interdicasterial meeting
on the occasion of the ad limina visit of the German bishops
on 18 November 2022 in Rome

Introduction

We bishops are grateful to have this opportunity for an interdicasterial meeting at the end of our ad limina visit to Rome. We regard it as a good opportunity to show mutual esteem in this special moment of our Church: The Church in Germany, closely interwoven with the universal Church. We want to reflect together on the experiences and results of the Synodal Path of the Church in our country. Yesterday, the Holy Father explained to us in his answers during the audience that the Church lives from tensions, which is why tensions are part of a living Church on the move. This is a good suggestion for today's discussion.

At the outset, I would like to express my sincere gratitude twice: It is good that the Holy Father has initiated the worldwide synodal process. As a path lasting several years, the third stage of which has just begun with the document presented here in Rome a few weeks ago, it is - like the whole process - a path of talking to and listening to one another. We thank the Holy Father for the theological search movement to find out what synodality is, as he formulated in his historic speech on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops in 2015.

Today we are here to talk about the Synodal Path in Germany. Honestly, I have to say: In this conversation, essential persons and supporters of the Synodal Path in our country are missing. For we bishops are part of a Synodal Assembly of 230 people - believers who work with great commitment for their Church. The Synodal Presidium consists of two bishops and two lay people. So, unfortunately, a large part of the synodal people – especially the laity – do not have the opportunity we have today. And that is why our reflections, discussions, shared perspectives and possibly directions are subject to being discussed, communalised and appropriated with all those involved in the Synodal Path.

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My second thanks go to the Holy Father for writing his letter “to the pilgrim people of God in Germany” on 29 June 2019. It expresses his pastoral care for our local Church. The perspective of the Pope's words is the change of times, the upheaval of which he speaks. We are in complete agreement with him for we are seeking a path of conversion and renewal. And Pope Francis has explained to us his understanding of synodality. All of you here can be sure that this letter has accompanied us along our Synodal journey. It has already been included in the preamble of our statutes. We have printed 80,000 copies of it and it has become the basis for many discussions with dioceses, groups and associations. In Germany, we have already been on a synodal journey for more than 50 years when important steps and to be made and decisions had to be taken. With our current process we have entered a new phase. And we would like to continue practising synodality in the future. We might not yet have sufficiently integrated the central points of the letter, but we are willing to learn to do this more and better in the future.

However, I also honestly say that it has caused surprise that the Pope's letter does not refer to the actual starting point of the Synodal Path, namely sexual abuse, the inadequate handling of it by church authorities, the cover-up by bishops and also the continuing lack of transparency shown by Roman authorities in dealing with it. Dear sisters and brothers, may I point out: Today is the annual day of remembrance initiated by the Pope for those affected by sexual abuse in the Church. For most of us bishops, it has become clear after the MHG study of 2018: All efforts for evangelisation will bear little fruit if radical honesty about mistakes and systemic deficiencies in our Church do not first lead to a consistent search for conversion and renewal, in structural terms and even in ecclesiastical practice and teaching. Not least, previous structures have led to the devastating scandal of sexual abuse of minors. I am quite astonished by the impression gained from some of the conversations during the past few days that not all of our interlocutors share this view.

As a Church, we have gambled away a lot of trust and have little credibility left. The scandal of sexual abuse must not be minimised or relativised in any way. First and foremost, we must protect minors and ensure that abuse that has hurt the Church to the core does not happen again. The authority of us bishops became questionable through our own fault. This hour shows one of the most serious crises of the Church and at the same time one of the most serious crises of the sacramental ministry of priests and bishops. Credibility and authority must once again be attributed to us by the faithful. Only in this way will the ministry in the Church be able to work fruitfully again. But we will only gain new trust if there is a major change in the way we exercise our ministry, involving clergy, religious and laity in decision-making and decision-taking in a serious and tangible way. And this not only applies to the Church in our country but also to the universal Church. We urge you to listen to us in this plight.

So why a Synodal Path?

We as bishops have listened and this has led us to take an important step and, together with the Central Committee of German Catholics, have launched the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany. The topics dealt with there are ultimately consequences of the “Abuse

Study” (MHG Study), which we bishops had commissioned and the results of which became available in 2018. The main content of the study is that various factors in the Church, which are closely interwoven with the way we as clergy have understood and lived our offices, have promoted acts of abuse and hindered the punishment of abuse.

We had to recognise that it was the use of power and the exploitation of dependence that led to abuse. You might also call it clericalism - which Pope Francis warns against again and again - because an authoritarian-clericalist understanding of ministry led to a cover-up of abusive behaviour and to the protection of the system. The focus was on the protection of the institution, and the interests and protection of those affected were neglected.

Abuse is not only individual misconduct. Abuse also has systemic causes. The way bishops, personnel managers in dioceses, ministers and sometimes also congregations have dealt with perpetrators and victims has certainly unintentionally given perpetrators the impression that their deeds were not so serious and has not deterred others from committing acts of abuse. Incidentally, this is also the conclusion reached by the final report on sexual abuse commissioned by the French Bishops' Conference.¹

In this respect, dealing with power in the Catholic Church, dealing with Catholic sexual morality and also reflecting on the priestly way of life (= topics of three of the four forums of the Synodal Path) are consequences of the need to come to terms with, clarify and prevent sexual abuse of minors and its also systemic causes. We want to break down these causes in order to regain the trust of people in and outside the Church.

Some will object that the issues mentioned, to which one must add the question of the role of women in the Church – in my personal estimation the decisive question for the future – have already been controversially discussed for several decades. Some even speak in this context of an “abuse of the abuse” aimed at pushing through an alleged reform agenda. I cannot understand this criticism and ask back: Should we not rather be ashamed that it took the uncovering of sexual and spiritual abuse for us to seriously address those aspects of proclamation and church life whose problems many believers and the theological debates have been drawing our attention to for decades? Today we must recognise that the critical voices are not an expression of the spirit of the times, but of a sincere concern for humanity and for a credible proclamation of the Church. For the sake of the Gospel, it is important that we listen to these voices.

¹ Cf. Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église (CIASE), *Les violences sexuelles dans l'Église catholique. France 1950–2020* of 5 October 2021 (Chap. II. Le questionnement quant aux causes profondes du phénomène des violences sexuelles perpétrées au sein de l'Église catholique, P. 311–345). <https://www.ciase.fr/medias/Ciase-Rapport-5-octobre-2021-Les-violences-sexuelles-dans-l-Eglise-catholique-France-1950-2020.pdf>.
English version: <https://www.ciase.fr/medias/Ciase-Final-Report-5-october-2021-english-version.pdf>.

That is why we bishops have decided to embark on a Synodal Path with the people of God in Germany. We have convened a Synodal Assembly that represents a cross-section of Catholic life in Germany. We bishops have not given away our official authority. But we want to live this authority in the sense of synodality. I know that the often heated debates in the Synodal Assemblies have irritated some in the universal Church and also here in Rome. Some have also publicly expressed their concern about where the Synodal Path may lead the Church in Germany. There is a lot of incomprehension and misunderstanding here. Therefore, let me say one thing quite unequivocally at this point:

The Synodal Path of the Church in Germany neither seeks a schism nor leads to a national church. Whoever speaks of schism or national church knows neither the German Catholics nor the German bishops. I am saddened by the power this word has acquired, with which one tries to deny us catholicity and the will to stay united with the universal Church. Unfortunately, this also includes the rather inaccurate comparison with a “good Protestant Church”. Unfortunately, it does not reflect the intention and goal of our efforts. For we are seeking a better Catholic Church that is alive out of the sacramental dimension. These efforts are truly exhausting and they also clearly bring us bishops into confrontations and tensions with each other. Yes, there are arguments in our forums and in our synodal assemblies. The situation resembles that in a family, where it sometimes gets loud. The sometimes emotional tone of the debate is an expression of passion for the Gospel and passion for the Church. And what would love be without passion? But we will stay together.

We approach the questions and problems that arise every day in preaching and pastoral work in a theological way. I consider the theology taught at our universities as a factor of wealth of the Church. The great commitment of the professors of theology on the Synodal Path helps us to better analyse the situation of the Church, to elaborate arguments and to look for solutions that can be justified on good theological grounds. Wealth can also make people arrogant and self-sufficient. Sisters and brothers, we know about this temptation. Perhaps one or the other has succumbed to it at times. But the service of university theology is indispensable for the Church. We need the knowledge and insights of the theological disciplines as well as the natural and human sciences in order to arrive at reliable answers to the questions of our time.

I would like to deliberately mention our resolutions here, because that is what we will be talking about later:

- Orientation text “On the path of conversion and renewal. Theological foundations of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany”
- Foundational text “Power and separation of powers in the Church – Joint participation and involvement in the mission”
- Implementation text “Involvement of the faithful in the appointment of the diocesan bishop”
- Implementation text “Sustainable strengthening of Synodality“

- Foundational text “Women in ministries and offices in the Church”
- Implementation text “A re-evaluation of homosexuality in the Magisterium ”
- Implementation text “Basic order of Church Service”

These texts have also been approved by more than two thirds, even up to 85 percent of the bishops. In the course so far, they are our answer to what we see as questions directed at the Church. No new Church is being founded, but the decisions of the Synodal Path ask, based on Holy Scripture, Tradition and the last Council, how we can be Church today - missionary and dynamic, encouraging and present, serving people and helping one another. With these texts we want to contribute to the conversation at the level of the universal Church.

When it comes to decisions, we naturally differentiate: What can we implement locally – we see ourselves encouraged to do so as bishops – and what requires consultation and decision-making at the level of the universal Church? We are grateful that the worldwide synodal process has given us the space to introduce these issues.

A situation of upheaval

The question of how we can live faith and be Church today is the central question for the future. You can be sure that along the Synodal Path we are not only talking about structures and circling around our own church tower. On the contrary: with the Synodal Path we want to revive speaking about God in public. Our society, as secular and even in a state of upheaval as it may be, needs religiosity, needs the public witness of the Christian faith and new impulses to bring God to the fore. Among those who offer meaning, however, today we represent only one offer among many. We need to make this offer, if you will allow me to use the term, visible and tangible in a new way.

Even if we are unlikely to be able to stop the erosion processes of a declining social form of the church (declining voluntary work, baptisms, acceptance of the church in public), we will not be discouraged to look for convincing forms of contemporary living the faith and to win people over to it anew. This is not an easy task, after all, for the first time in the history of our country, Catholics and Protestants account for less than 50 percent of the population. The consequences of the Corona pandemic are obvious, also in our pastoral life.

We are in a situation of upheaval. No one has the one solution to offer yet. Nor are there only simple solutions. In the Bishops' Conference, we are debating with each other what is good and right in this situation and what needs to be done. We do not only agree that we disagree; we all see ourselves in the personal and common responsibility of wanting to actively shape this situation and this hour of the Church and not just reactively accept it. But here in the discussion we do not form a "block" having a uniform opinion, because there is a wide range of opinions and options for action among us.

Prospects

That is why we are looking for you as dialogue partners to help us endure and shape this current tension. We are concerned that "resolving" the tensions too quickly could lead to divisions that do not help any of us. We have come in the hope that together we may find a catholic framework within which differences and inconsistencies are also allowed to have their place.

The Synod of Bishops makes a strong case that listening to each other is highly important. This aspect, too, is to be considered taking into account that trust has been disrupted. But: listening does take place; especially in the synodal forums; one forum has even adopted a special method of listening to each other in the tension-filled discussions and in particular to make the minorities audible. And we meet in hearings in the run-up to synodal assemblies to explore the issues together. At the same time, we work on the texts between meetings so that everyone has the opportunity to contribute their views to the debate.

We are glad to be able to bring our concerns and tensions into the synodal process of the universal church, which will continue in the continental phase in spring 2023; we are grateful that the extension of the universal church phase has also slowed things down a little, which is certainly helpful for mutual reassurance. The working document allows the diverse voices of the universal Church to have their say in original quotations. It reports on the experiences of the local churches, the difficulties encountered in realising a synodal Church, but also on the fruits that the synodal processes have already produced. After only one year, this synodal process has already generated dynamics that have led to a new understanding of the dignity of all the baptised, to a broader co-responsibility of the faithful for the mission of the Church and to a clearer perception of the challenges we face in the worldwide Church. Thus, the synodal process has already transformed the Church.

Therefore, I would like to emphasise once again: The Roman working document for the Synod makes it clear that the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany is to be understood as part of a synodal dynamism that has taken hold of the whole Church. The issues we are dealing with in the four forums and at the synodal assemblies are also being discussed in other parts of the Church. In addition, the working paper also offers a valuable and impressive view 'beyond one's own nose' to the topics, questions and perspectives shared by other members of the people of God worldwide. Much is to be discovered that is shared, that can be compared well, but also that is distinctively specific.

And now we are looking forward to receiving your questions, further impulses and to a fraternal exchange of views.