



Presentation

of Synodal Forum II

“Priestly existence today”

for the First Reading

at the Second Synodal Assembly (30 September - 2 October 2021)

for the basic text (draft file)

Preamble

At the beginning of the Synodal Path was the wound, the wound of abuse perpetrated by deacons, priests and bishops. And the abuse is still going on. Sexualised violence inflicted lifelong wounds on the victims. Some victims committed suicide. Others live in despair over the years and commit suicide. Still others survive, with their wound scarred over at best. But they survive. Some come forward, without words or with words. They courageously overcome numerous hurdles. But they were and still are always listened to insufficiently, or not at all. They are not taken seriously, they are muzzled by priests and bishops, but also by parents, teachers and other people to whom they relate. Only a few see, saw and recognised what is happening and what has happened. But they could not or would not believe what they saw and recognised. Covering up, rejection or denial of responsibility, or silence of one's own accord or under duress, lead to a burden being placed on the victims that others should bear.

But the silence finally broke - inexorably. As shocking as it is, this is not scandalous. What is scandalous is the abuse. It is not scandalous that the media are reporting on it. The abuse was the scandal; the abuse is the scandal. The abuse is the victims' lasting wound.

This wound remains. It could heal better if the perpetrators, those who covered up for them, and those who have wrongly remained silent, were to take responsibility for their actions. But this has almost never happened so far. Almost all the perpetrators deny their offences. Many concealers at the level of those with responsibility are still failing to consistently face up to their moral responsibility, and often not even their legal responsibility. Too many who know about it are hiding themselves away. There are different explanations for why they do so, be it for lack of courage, be it for lack of understanding, be it for lack of acceptance of responsibility, or to protect the supposed good reputation of the Church as an institution. It is difficult

to admit to having made mistakes because too much is at stake: one's own position, one's own prestige, and not least one's self-image as a priest, human being and holder of responsibility.

Because of this, the original wound does not heal, and the wounds of the victims continue to fester. And this also affects the personal environment. The wound spreads and paralyses the Church. These secondary wounds also have to be taken into account.

For even if there is no collective guilt, there is collective shame among many: Many priests are ashamed for their fellow priests, indeed, they are ashamed to be priests and to belong to a group that has acted in such blatant contradiction of their own ideals and aspirations. One might say that this is not necessary, and that it should be looked at in a differentiated way. But it is a fact that many are ashamed. Without being directly responsible, they are wounded because the original wound is not being treated.

At the same time, many people who are not priests, within and outside the Church, do not view priests in a differentiated manner, and place them under general suspicion. The trust that was placed in them the past has largely given way to a general distrust that makes the task of the priests difficult or even impossible.

But the shame extends beyond the group of priests. Many people are ashamed to be Catholic today. Many are disappointed, resigned, confused and angry. They not only have to put up with being ridiculed for their faith, but they are asked why they have not left this Church long since. This places them in a dilemma because the Church nonetheless still means home to them. And not a few leave the Church to save their faith. The original wound of those affected festers and spreads far and wide because those in positions of responsibility are still not sufficiently assuming this very responsibility. This leads to erosion and is a shock for the Church as a whole.

The revelation of sexualised violence shows that systemic mistakes have fatal consequences. The reform attempts of the Würzburg Synod, which tried to make the use of power in the Church more credible, transparent and just, were delayed and put on the back burner, also due to a lack of courage, not least among the priesthood.

It is particularly also the proclamation and the handling of sexual morals that has exerted pressure on many people which they could not follow. It is all the more serious given that so much sexual abuse was committed by the group of those who proclaimed this morality. All this created an atmosphere in which it was possible for abusers to get off scot free. Many find this discrepancy between expectations of others and reality to be unbearable to this day.

Such a system did not pay heed to the victims; their wounds were not noticed, and they did not receive any help - they were left alone. The victims were neither taken seriously nor protected. The perpetrators were not recognised as perpetrators, so that there was no professional, responsible way of dealing with them. Today we know that there are perpetrators and that it is necessary to work with them. There is a fundamental need for the victims to receive empathetic care, and this also applies to those who have contracted guilt - for the good of all: priests and faithful, and indeed for the good of the Church.

Along with the concrete measures (prevention, intervention, acknowledgement, reappraisal, ...), a systemic view is needed. For this there is the Synodal Path. The forum entitled "Priestly

existence today” asks itself how the priestly existence can be reconsidered and lived in a new way today, both on the basis of tradition and in the societal context.

There is a consensus that sexualised violence and concealment represent a clear contradiction of the Gospel in each individual case because they destroy lives. There is a consensus that exaltation and sacralisation of the priesthood have helped make abuse possible, led to victims’ voices being ignored, perpetrators being transferred to other parishes, and sexualised violence being actively hushed up in order to protect the institution.

In order to be able to help heal the wound described above, this consensus motivates drastic systemic changes that frighten and unsettle some. But it is only in structures and with a climate that permanently prevent abuse and concealment to the greatest possible extent that we can preserve what our faith has charged us with as the Gospel. This is the ground on which we stand together, no matter whether we belong to those who want to move forward more quickly, or to those who take more cautious steps. Together we can find the right path that will ultimately lead all to life.

As with the Apostolic Council, these are big steps for everyone. It is about nothing less than questions of turning away from the patriarchal system with its male-orientated structures, and about a new approach to the priesthood of ministry within the common priesthood of all the faithful; about questions of turning away from exaggerated and sacralised priestly roles, and about reflections on the involvement of women at different levels of the Church; about questions of turning away from a purely masculine, celibate approach to the priesthood.

The goal of this work is to see to it that everything is done to make sexualised violence in our Church impossible, or even better: to prevent it. There is no doubt that, in order to do so, we need a climate in which each and every individual takes a firm stand against the crimes of sexualised violence and abuse. Last but not least, however, we need unanimity to address those abuses within the system that have made room for sexualised violence and abuse, and determination to provide options for action to overcome them.

The Forum entitled “Priestly existence today” has formulated such options for action in order to reform the priestly ministry and life in this sense.

The sacramentality of the Church and the mission of those who are baptised

THE question

Preventing sexualised violence in the Church is the goal pursued in the work of the Synodal Forum on Priestly existence today. In line with the remarks that were made in the Preamble, this also requires a theological foundation which itself differs in character and linguistic style, and which addresses two questions. First, the theology of the priestly ministry must be examined systemically in the light of the common shaping of faith and the Church, as summarised in the term synodality. Secondly, the relevance of the theology of the sacramental priestly ministry for the concrete shape given to the life of the Church, and of the individual minister, must be critically examined. The theological foundations for this are provided by important official church documents, which in the everyday life of the Church must be truly translated into life, and thus made fruitful. What is needed today is a pastoral implementation of the

sacramental priesthood which begins by taking stock in an honest manner¹, and is able to place the theological fundamentals in the right place therein. As Pope Francis stresses in his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, we are living “in a turning point in history, which raises new and old issues, in view of which a discussion is justified and necessary”².

The priest in the people of God

In his Letter to the pilgrim people of God, Pope Francis desires a “pastoral conversion”³ which is measured by the primacy of evangelisation, as the Church is to be a “sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1), and to share “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” with all (GS 1). In synodal terms, this can only be realised as the path of the whole people of God⁴. It is from this vocation of God’s people alone that reflection on the ministry of the priest is possible, who must never forget “that he has come from them and that by serving them he will find and express his most pure and complete identity. This in turn will lead to adopting a simple and austere way of life, rejecting privileges that have nothing to do with the Gospel.”⁵.

1 Peter and other New Testament Scriptures already speak of the common dignity and the unity of all in the one people of God. The Biblical theology of baptism includes the awareness of all who are baptised being anointed by the Spirit (1 John 2:20) and forming a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). Hebrews in particular develops an awareness that there is only one priest, namely Christ himself, through whom all who are baptised gain access to the Father. He brings salvation, and there can be no other mediator. His giving His life makes all sacrifices complete, so that nothing must be added to His sacrifices, except that the faithful follow his gift and so give the praise due to the Father. Therein lies the priestly dignity of all who are baptised. To this day, in the anointing of Christ in baptism, the newly-baptised are assured of being members of God’s people and of sharing in the priestly, royal and prophetic office of Christ. The common baptism is the bond that brings everyone together and unites them in the one people of God. Even before the New Testament speaks about different services and offices, baptism and anointing with the Spirit forms the sacramental foundation of churchhood. Each and every baptised person represents Christ and the Church.

The various ministries and offices are to serve the realisation of unity and enable the individual members of God’s people to follow their personal path of priesthood. This also applies to sacramentally-ordained priests who are in the service of the people of God. The priest does not exist alone. His service consists in confirming the vocation of the whole people of God.

¹ Cf. BAUMANN, Klaus et al. (eds.), *Zwischen Spirit und Stress. Die Seelsorgenden in den deutschen Diözesen*, Würzburg 2017.

² POPE FRANCIS, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany. VAS 220 (29 June 2020).

³ POPE FRANCIS, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No. 6.

⁴ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in: VAS 194 (24 November 2013), No. 111: “The entire people of God proclaims the Gospel: Evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary.”

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, Letter to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars (4 August 2019).

The different representations of the Church already convey in the New Testament both the perspective of serving, as well as that of a counterpart. There are images that express in strong words the nearness between Christ and His Church, for example in the reflection on the Church as the body of Christ (e.g. *Eph* 4:12), whilst others consider the juxtaposition of Christ and the Church, such as when Christ is seen as the Bridegroom of the Church (cf. *Eph* 5:21-33). This is significant insofar as the Church Herself may not be equated with Christ. *Lumen gentium* 8 consequently sees the Church in an analogy to Christ, but not in complete congruence. This analogy must also be observed for the ordained minister. He performs a service to the community as a member of the people of God. He is to perform his service in a community-building, motivating way for others, not in competition with the other baptised individuals. His service is to enable each and every baptised person to live out their own churchhood⁶. He can only exercise this ministry meaningfully and fruitfully if he integrates himself into the people of God as a servant.

The Biblical archetype of service is the washing of the feet, which Jesus concludes with the instruction: "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet." (*John* 13:1-17). Historically, a one-sided view has emerged. As Christ faces his Church, so the clergy emerged as a separate category facing the congregation, not only in the liturgical representation, but also in all the activities of the priest as ordained, teacher, king and prophet, to follow the image of the Christological offices. An understanding of the clergy came into being which made them the actual representatives of the Church to the congregation, and thus also of Christ. This perspective becomes problematic when it is no longer complemented by remembering the common sacramental foundation in baptism, as well as when the minister forgets the analogy that underpins his claim to represent Christ. He represents Christ, but he is not another Christ. The authority conferred on him by virtue of ordination is not identical to the claim of Christ to be the Head of the Church. It is a delegated authority, for no one can carry out his ordained ministry without being founded in the people of God.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*" of the Second Vatican Council attempts to eliminate potential, i.e. historically-conditioned, flaws. The concept of the Church as a hierarchically-ordered "*societas perfecta*", that is as a society of unequals, can still be found in the draft versions⁷. *Lumen gentium* itself then prefers the ecclesiology of the people of God such that the description of the commonalities precedes the hierarchical order of the Church. The equality of the baptised goes first, and conditions the diversity that we find. The priesthood of the ministry is preceded by the common priesthood of all the faithful, which expresses itself in prophesy, leadership and witness. Thus the Council has laid the foundation for embedding the ministry of the priest in the many ministries and spiritual gifts in the Church. It cannot be overlooked that certain shortcomings in the understanding of the priestly ministry in and for the people of God have not been eliminated in the decades up to the pre-

⁶ Pope Francis refers in his Post-Synodal Exhortation "*Christus vivit*" to the fundamental proexistence of each calling: "So often in life, we waste time asking ourselves: 'Who am I?' You can keep asking, 'Who am I?' for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: 'For whom am I?'" Of course, you are for God. But he has decided that you should also be for others, and he has given you many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but to share with those around you." Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* to young people and to the entire people of God. VAS 218 (25 March 2018), No. 286.

⁷ Cf. WENZEL, Geschichte des II. Vatikanischen Konzils, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 61-66.

sent day, even in official church documents. A truly convincing reception of the theology of *Lumen gentium* is not consistently evident.

The texts of the Council remain authoritative for today's reflection on the people of God and the priestly ministry. The German bishops considered and developed concrete consequences in their statement on the renewal of the pastoral ministry "*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*" of 1 August 2015⁸. Esteem for the gifts of the Spirit and the recognition that all are called through baptism to live a holy life and to contribute their own gifts to the Church⁹ is significant here. The charisms of all who are baptised are acknowledged as the richness of the Church. The text recalls the priestly dignity of those who are baptised, which cannot be increased. Ordained priests are to be instruments, but are not to form a "caste" of their own¹⁰.

These texts also constitute an important foundation for the further work of the "Synodal Path". It is to be noted that "old" images continue to prevail in the mentality of the priests and the faithful. The reception of the Second Vatican Council is not complete with regard to this question. The good and profound ecclesiological images have not really become identity-forming, either for all priests or for other faithful. The images describe a great nearness of the priest to the people of God. In many ways, this no longer corresponds to what is experienced in the expanding pastoral territories. The faithful also find these images existentially difficult to comprehend.

Priests' self-perception and the perception of others do not always coincide. An uncertainty of roles exists on the part of the priests as well as on the part of the other faithful with regard to priests, and different images of the ministry of the priest, and these are not necessarily compatible. This may lead to (personal) crises of identity for priests. It is then tempting to seek clarity through demarcation. Priests do not gain authority over the people of God by these means. This touches on the issue of power¹¹.

The common representation of Christ by the baptised and the representation of Christ by the priest

Each and every baptised person represents Christ, the only one "declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (*Hebr* 5:10), who has made His Church into a kingdom of "priests for his God and Father" (*Revelation* 1:6). "The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly"¹². The representation of Christ by the priest in the administration of the sacraments reserved for him is distinct from this, and especially within the celebration of the Eucharist. Here, the person of the priest recedes behind the figure of Christ to whom he refers. The priest serves Christ and the people of God here by withdrawing. It is clear in Magis-

⁸ Cf. SECRETARIAT OF THE GERMAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (publisher), *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*. Statement by the German bishops on the renewal of the pastoral ministry, in: *Die deutschen Bischöfe* 100, Bonn 2015.

⁹ Cf. Pope Francis, Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, No. 9: "The anointing of the Holy which was poured out on the whole body of the Church "distributes special graces among the faithful of every state and condition of life, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (1 Cor 12:11). Through these he makes them suitable and ready to undertake various works and ministries for the renewal and full construction of the Church, according to the word: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit" (1 Cor 12:7)."

¹⁰ Medard Kehl, Stephan Keßler, *Priesterlich werden. Anspruch für Laien und Kleriker*, Würzburg 2010, 19.

¹¹ The groups of topics "office and leadership" is dealt with by the Synodal Forum "Power and separation of powers in the Church - Joint participation and involvement in the mission".

¹² CCC 1546.

terial texts that the "*repraesentatio Christi*" by the priest is not limited solely to the sacramental celebration of or presiding over the Eucharist, but concerns the entire priestly existence¹³. This opens up the question of the relationship between the representation of Christ by the priest outside the Eucharist, and similarly the representation of Christ by all faithful.

Whereas the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Orders, acts in the person of Christ the Head (LG 10) when administering the sacraments, and *the faithful* hence receive an assurance that the grace of the sacrament applies regardless of the holiness of the person administering it, this ministry to the people of God has no higher dignity or holiness, "The configuration of the priest to Christ the head - namely, as the principal source of grace - does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions "do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others"."¹⁴ The representation of Christ, which results from baptism, is thus not increased through ordination as a priest. In his representation of Christ, the priest serves that of the whole people of God¹⁵. If all the faithful however share in the priesthood of Christ, and are therefore companions ("*syn- hodoi*")¹⁶, the sacramental ministry of ordination becomes essentially visible as service in and to a synodal Church.

The concrete implementation of the common representation of Christ will help the priest to live out the sacramental representation of Christ. Against the background of the scandal of sexual abuse in the Church, and of the findings of the MHG study, it is important that the priest, outside the administration of the sacraments, does not take on the role of Christ Himself and confuse himself with the voice of God or be mistaken for this voice by the faithful. This can lead to spiritual abuse of power. Since it is difficult for a person to live in the long run defining himself or herself in a constant confrontation with the congregation, it is also important to pay attention to one another in the people of God. It is a task of the priest to reflect on these tensions in the priestly self-perception, and to integrate them into his own life. In thinking about the concrete shaping of the priestly ministry, the tension between interaction and juxtaposition must not be resolved unilaterally in one direction or the other, as becomes clear in the corresponding options for action.

The sacramental nature of ordained ministry

The sacramental ministry is part and parcel of the "essence" of what is Catholic. The sacramental understanding of the priest should actually correct its purely functional view. Understanding for and of sacramentality is however not unanimous, and in many areas it is diminish-

¹³ Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, in: VAS 105 (25 March 1992), No. 14: "In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ - the head and shepherd - authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation - particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit. In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the head and shepherd." *Pastores dabo vobis* No. 16 notes: "Inasmuch as he represents Christ the head, shepherd and spouse of the Church, the priest is placed not only *in the Church* but also *in the forefront of the Church*."

¹⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 104.

¹⁵ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 104: "The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all."

¹⁶ Cf. INTERNATIONALE THEOLOGISCHE KOMMISSION, *Synodalität in Leben und Sendung der Kirche*, in: VAS 215 (2 March 2018), No. 55.

ing, so that the discussions are becoming louder about what specifically are priestly tasks, and what others should also do.

“*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*” acknowledges the sacramental ministry of the priest as indispensable. The common priesthood is not a competition, but its specific mission can only be understood in the context of the common ministry and the specific mission that it entails. In essence, it is a service rendered for unity which itself is in the celebration of the Eucharist “which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (LG 11). This ministry of unity which is indispensable for the Church is *the* unique feature of the priestly ministry. The sacramentality of the priesthood, and the holiness of the Church, by no means imply flawlessness. Moreover, we must warn against the temptations of Donatism, where the holiness of the Church is said to depend on the holiness of individuals, and of Pelagianism, which claims that man can redeem himself through his own efforts. Pope Francis has rejected this, emphasising unequivocally: “The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative.”¹⁷.

The ordained priest has the prophetic task of expressing the standard of the Gospel in a quite corrective sense, and of making clear in his sacramental actions “that God is faithful, that Christ Himself is present in the Church: real, concrete, personal and unadulterated”¹⁸. Ordination does not release him from the necessity to strive for credibility, in fact quite the reverse. It is indispensable in order to be able to fruitfully exercise his mission and the ministry of unity. “*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*” explains the wording of *Lumen gentium* 10, “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated”. It is not a matter of a larger quantity of holiness or dignity; in fact the essential difference consists in the sacramental ministry to the community. This ministry of unity is also realised by priests through the ministry of leadership. The bishops warn against understanding this leadership ministry in categories of superordination and subordination, as this would massively contradict the intention of *Lumen gentium*.

The leadership ministry is a broad, open term¹⁹. Leadership serves in essence to enable participation by many in the diverse tasks of the Church. Leadership seeks the spiritual gifts, and it enables their realisation in the ministry for the unity of the Church. Leadership by priests understands “being church together” not in the sense of an isolated “rule”, but as a relational event. Baptised Christians participate in leadership insofar as they enrich the Church with their gifts and professions and serve the cause of unity. Leadership is not reduced to the question of what the one may do, but the other may not. Leadership is more than mere decision-making competence. It will also be important to emphasise this aspect against the background of the Vatican Instruction entitled “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church” of the Congregation for the Clergy of 20 July 2020. A broad concept of leadership reduces tensions in the debates on competences and tasks under church law.

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* on the call to holiness in today’s world. VAS 213 (19 March 2018), No. 52.

¹⁸ *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 37.

¹⁹ Cf. *Gemeinsam Kirche sein*, 41 et seqq.

The evangelical counsels

The evangelical counsels which Jesus proposes in the Sermon on the Mount (*Mt* 5-7), and especially those of poverty, chastity and obedience, can be the expression of a life in the discipleship of Christ of all faithful (cf. LG 39). All three are mandatory under church law for faithful who have opted for them through profession in institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life (cf. c. 573 §1 CIC). They are a possible answer to the question of what it means to leave everything and follow Christ (*Mt* 10:28). Especially when it comes to possessions, feelings and power, they also serve to flesh out discipleship for the so-called secular priest, who is called "to live these counsels in accordance with those ways and, more specifically, those goals and that basic meaning which derive from and express his own priestly identity"²⁰.

The ministry of a priest is not only to be characterised by solidarity with the poor and deprived, but it is necessary to allow oneself to be evangelised by them²¹. As an indication of this, he is to live out his interactions in accordance with the evangelical counsel of *poverty*, which also needs to be re-examined today with regard to remuneration and the handling of financial possibilities (cf. c. 282 §1 and 2 CIC), as shown by the associated options on the lifestyle culture of the priest and in priestly training. This evangelical counsel also includes "spiritual poverty", understood in the sense of the constant practice of "holy indifference"²². Priests in a synodal Church are concerned to become as indifferent as possible before taking (important) decisions in their field of responsibility, in accordance with the teachings by St. Ignatius of Loyola²³.

The evangelical counsel of the *obedience* of the priest towards the bishop and the Church in relation to the ministry to the people of God concerns the area of life of power, and is spelled out anew in practical terms in the options, which themselves deal with personnel development and service contracts.

Celibacy is intended to signify the representation of Christ and the prophetic dimension of the priestly ministry. Priests have theological standing within God's people. Despite and due to manifold encounters and commitments, many priests lack both the experience of being embedded in the everyday life of the people of God, as well as that of acceptance of and support for their way of life by the concrete community of the faithful. The lack of having a home may lead to loneliness through one's own fault and the fault of others.

The celibate way of life is however not to be confused with hermitism, but presupposes a way of life that is rich in relationships, both within the Church as well as with regard to wider worldly relational structures. This however poses a risk of the celibate way of life leading to isolation if the symbolism is no longer supported by large sections of the people of God. In addition, sacramentality itself is at risk if celibacy were to become the reason for the profession of priest becoming worryingly less attractive, so that the high esteem and practice of the

²⁰ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, No. 27.

²¹ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 198.

²² Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Gaudete et exultate*, No. 69.

²³ According to Saint Ignatius of Loyola: "only desiring and choosing that which leads us closer to the goal for which are created". (Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *Principle and Foundation*, II,3, quoted from: ZODROW, Leo, "Principle and Foundation". An Ignatian short formula for the consummation of the spiritual life, in: *GuL* 58 (3/1958), 175-191, here: 178).

Sunday celebration of the Eucharist required by the Magisterial documents can also no longer be guaranteed in the long term. It is urgent to ask which “value” must be the higher one.

Working as a priest in a synodal Church

Around 10,000 secular priests, and roughly 2,000 priests in religious orders, ordained in Germany, as well as about 1,400 priests ordained in a foreign diocese, are active in the Church in Germany in a wide variety of areas²⁴. A majority, but not all, are active in pastoral care in parishes. Other areas of activity include pastoral care of foreigners, pastoral care in universities and schools, adult education or academies, Caritas, the associations and spiritual communities, youth pastoral care, hospital pastoral care and pastoral care for persons with disabilities, the Church’s administration or the exercise of priestly activity in a secondary office (e.g. “worker priests”). Some priests perform their ministry as ordained bishops²⁵. The ministry of the priest cannot therefore be reduced to that of the parish priest, which is particularly taken into account in the options for pastoral care for vocations in the narrow sense and in priestly training, but is regarded in terms of its sacramental dimension. As explained above, this develops on the path of the people of God in the manifold areas of responsibility, i.e. synodally.

The jointly-trodden path (*syn-hodos*) is largely determined by the method (“*met-hodos*” - the path towards something). Pope Francis referred to this in his address at the opening of the synod on young people as “an ecclesial exercise in discernment”, consisting in a three-step process of spiritual discernment - perceiving, interpreting and choosing²⁶. If the Church and the synod are synonymous²⁷, priests serve to call the people of God in their respective areas by accompanying them on the Path there in a suitable manner, together with the people, in spiritual synodal processes.

This requires a twofold perception and connection which establishes a joyful identity of the priest, as Pope Francis sets forth in his “Letter to priests”: “For our hearts to be encouraged, we should not neglect the dialectic that determines our identity. First, our relationship with Jesus. [...] The other essential aspect of this dialectic is our relationship to our people”²⁸. In the second step, the synodal method must be interpreted in the light of the “*salus animarum*” (CIC, can. 1752), and the faith of the whole Church *cum et sub petro* must be distinguished from public opinion²⁹. Synodality is not an end in itself after all, but “the *innermost goal* of the Synod as an instrument of the implementation of Vatican II can only be *mission*”³⁰.

²⁴ Cf. in this regard: SECRETARIAT OF THE GERMAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE (publisher), Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral. May 2021, 3.

²⁵ Cf. in this regard: SECRETARIAT OF THE GERMAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE (publisher), Kontinuierliche jährliche Erhebung statistischer Eckdaten über Priester, Diakone und andere hauptamtliche Mitarbeiter/innen in der Pastoral. May 2021, 9-19. The age structure will be added to.

²⁶ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Address at the opening of the synod on young people (3 October 2018): http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html.

²⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Arbeitshilfen 276), published by SECRETARIAT OF THE GERMAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, Bonn 2015, p. 28.

²⁸ Pope Francis, Letter to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars (4 August 2019).

²⁹ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, p. 27. Cf. for the interaction between hierarchical and charismatic gifts: CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF

The synodal approach means a change and inculturation of attitudes and structures, as elaborated in the corresponding options.

The priest's following of Christ *in this time and in this society*

Pope Francis calls in "Querida Amazonia" for an "Inculturation of forms of ministry"³¹. This is not only for the Amazonas³². Inculturation is a twofold movement which includes both the transformation of culture through the Gospel, as well as receiving the Holy Spirit from culture³³. This leads to two questions, on the one hand with regard to the way of life of the priest in our society, but on the other hand concerning the concrete life of the individual priest: (1) What does inculturation mean for a specific way of life of the priest in our secular and global society in which individual freedom and equality are highly valued? (2) How can a priest live in an inculturated manner, i.e. *in dialogue and thus full of tension*, between a religiously-motivated counter-culture and a bourgeois existence in the specific area into which he is posted, and against the horizon of globalisation and the changes that it brings? In other words: How does he live to follow Christ *in this time and in this society*?

The following options for the ministry and existence of the parish priest today, and looking ahead to the 21st Century, seek to provide an answer to these questions³⁴. The Forum "Priestly existence today" has formulated options aiming to reform the priestly service and the priestly life.

THE FAITH, Letter "*Iuvenescit Ecclesia*" to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church, in: VAS 205 (15 May 2016).

³⁰ Cf. CHRISTOPH KARDINAL SCHÖNBORN, Address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015), in: Ansprache bei der 50-Jahr-Feier der Errichtung der Bischofssynode (17. Oktober 2015), in: Die Berufung und Sendung der Familie in Kirche und Welt von heute. Texte zur Bischofssynode 2015 und Dokumente der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (Arbeitshilfen 276), published by SECRETARIAT OF THE GERMAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, Bonn 2015, p. 92.

³¹ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonia, in: VAS 222 (2 February 2020), Nos. 85-90, here No. 85: "Inculturation should also be increasingly reflected in an incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry. If we are to inculturate spirituality, holiness and the Gospel itself, how can we not consider an inculturation of the ways we structure and carry out ecclesial ministries?"

³² Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Evangelii Gaudium, No. 115: "Grace supposes culture, and God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it."

³³ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Querida Amazonia, No. 68: "On the one hand, a fruitful process takes place when the Gospel takes root in a given place, for "whenever a community receives the message of salvation, the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel". On the other hand, the Church herself undergoes a process of reception that enriches her with the fruits of what the Spirit has already mysteriously sown in that culture. In this way, "the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face". In the end, this means allowing and encouraging the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel to be preached "in categories proper to each culture, creating a new synthesis with that particular culture".

³⁴ The Synodal Forum "Priestly existence today" voted at its meeting held on 27 May 2021 to take a realistic view (studies, own experience,...) of the priestly existence today, and to formulate options both for priests today and for further development, and new forms of the priestly existence for the future. 65% approved this option. 19% agreed with the statement that the Forum should take exclusively a realistic view (studies, own experience, ...) of the priestly existence today, and formulate options for priests today. 6% agreed with the statement that the Forum should deal exclusively with the question of the further development and new forms of the priestly existence for the future. The rest abstained.