



Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!

Statement
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Reflections on the German trial of the Synodal Way

Throughout recent times I myself have followed the course of the Synodal Path in Germany with hope and expectation. After all, the Synodal Process offers unsuspected opportunities for the Catholic Church of the future. And not only in Germany. The concrete application of synodality translates itself on different levels: in the local Church, in the communion between the local Churches of a region and in the universal Church.

Synodality emerges as a new concept from Pope Francis, grafted onto Vat II: on the basis of the doctrine of *sensus fidei fidelium*, all members of the Church are active subjects of evangelisation. Our present pope often uses the image of the road and invites us to go on the road together, both within the Church and in the wider society. His language is even more explicit in the exhortation *Christ Lives* when he says of youth ministry that it "can only be synodal, in other words, it can only come about by "walking together". This implies an appreciation of the charisms that the Holy Spirit bestows on each member of the Church in accordance with their vocation and mission, through a process of co-responsibility. Motivated by this Spirit, we can evolve into a participatory and co-responsible Church that is aware of its rich diversity and accepts the contributions of lay people, including both young people and women, ordained men and women, and groups, associations and movements. A synodal process presupposes trust in the working of the Spirit in and through all participants.

It is not easy to give shape to the listening of all in a synodal process. The greatest possible involvement of 'the people of God' here in your Synodal Way is not limited to the preparatory phase but also takes place in the discernment during the synodal meetings themselves.

Both in constitution or style, in structures such as councils or consultation bodies and in concrete processes or practices, namely the meetings of those bodies, synodality speaks. This is fully reflected in the way the Synodal Way was set up and developed in Germany: synodal meetings, regional conferences, clearly structured discussion groups, input from experts as the impetus for discussions, hearings where people are listened to above all, discussion in forums, adapted working formats, time for the respective subjects, opportunities for individual participation, authentic testimonies, etc. The Covid pandemic was also used as an opportunity to reflect on the role and place of the Church in society and to improve communication through modern media and digital technology. Sharing power also means communicating in a transparent and understandable way, for example to reach the younger generation and people at the grassroots and in the communities.

The participants in the synodal process reflect a meaningful and balanced picture of the local Church, its diversity of vocations, ministries, charisms, competences, social status and geographical origin.

The themes, not exactly the easiest, are clearly formulated, with advancing insight, without limiting open and receptive reflection. Care is taken that theological depth does not endanger accessibility.

Everything is prepared and carried out with the well-known Deutsche Gründlichkeit. I noticed it already during the first synod meeting when the statutes were laid down.

Areas of tension are inevitable in this synodal process. What is important is how they are handled. Encouraging is the attitude of the German Bishops' Conference, which "in the sense of an honest struggle to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and in the sense of a sincere synodality, considers it important that the bishops also seek an open and at the same time constructive dialogue with each other". How they want to address emerging conflicts with each other from a common evangelical mission. One of the challenges will be to balance the tension between unity and diversity in the Catholic Church. The path of the synodal process itself is therefore at least as important as the outcome.

In the synodal process, the faithful are taken seriously. It is more than a non-binding advice. But the synodal process takes place within a hierarchically structured community where a distinction must be made between the process of decision making through a common work of discernment, consultation and cooperation, and the pastoral decision (decision taking) which falls under the authority of the hierarchical leader. The latter should not happen without the former. Sometimes decisions have to be made. Ultimately, there is someone who exercises authority. In the Church, this is not a power, but a service. That decision-making is the process of searching together, listening to each other, presenting options and weighing them up. Synodality promotes better decision-making. The art consists in bringing together the multitude

of ideas into a multiform unity. It is not enough to listen to each other. A further step towards decision-making is necessary. Resolutions must be turned into decisions and must not merely serve as non-binding advice.

It is encouraging that the renewing synodal process does not lose itself in the opposition between renewers and conservatives. The search for distinctions takes place in a constructive dialogue, listening to what the Spirit is saying through the other.

The Synodal Way, however, must initiate church renewal and reformation with a view to strengthening evangelisation and creating vibrant church communities. The reinstatement of partly long-suppressed debates on reforms is important. In this way, the German Catholic Church can truly take the step into the 21st century and bring a new dynamism to church life. It is not an easy road, it is bumpy and winding, but it is a road we must take.

The process of the synodal road does indeed serve the whole world Church, as Thomas Sternberg, president of the ZdK, says. The path being followed is therefore also of importance for Catholics in other parts of Europe.

I am grateful that I can be a witness to your Synodal Way and that I can follow it from my place and from my commitments. With the European Laity Forum (ELF), we want to share and deepen our experiences with synodality as believers from various faith communities within Europe during our next Study Assembly. The perspective will be: "Daily life is all we have, how do we live as Christians in today's society?" But for living our faith daily we need religious communities. Living our faith daily has to be concretely centred in Christian communities, and we must consider how do we build them up. *A synodal church as a basis for religious communities.*

Findings and distinctions that come to light during your synodal process are something we would like to take on board. At the end of the study assembly, a statement will express the opinions and insights on the topic and bring them to the fore. In this way we hope to support the synodal process with you, but also to convey a message to the Synod of Bishops in October 22.

I pray to the Spirit to continue to inspire you on this synodal path and I wish you much courage and perseverance.