



## **Presentation**

### **of Synodal Forum II**

**“Priestly existence today”**

**for the Second Reading**

**at the Fourth Synodal Assembly (8-10 September 2022)**

**for the implementation text**

**“Celibacy of priests - encouragement and opening”**

**[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 25 Yes, 4 No]**

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#### **a) Votes on celibacy among diocesan priests**

##### **Introduction**

The matter of priestly celibacy concerns many among the faithful. We wish for our deliberations to be followed by all, and not only by specialist theologians, and have therefore opted to use comprehensible language and a clear structure. We would furthermore like to make our discernment of spirits transparent, and are thus enabling everyone to follow our train of thought.

**Our reflections are headed by a seven-fold “affirmation”:**

Affirmation of the sacramentality of the Church.

Affirmation of a sacramental priesthood, which is just as constitutive for our Catholic Church as is the common priesthood of all who are baptised, in the service of which the sacramental priesthood stands.

Affirmation of people being able to encounter priests who promise them salvation at the key points of human existence and in its ups and downs, and make it tangible.

Affirmation of the priestly ministry allowing the abiding presence and working of Jesus Christ to be experienced in many ways throughout the world.

Affirmation that this ministry is to shape people’s entire lives and existence in such a way that it can be experienced as an authentic witnesses of life.

Affirmation of a priestly way of life which is shaped by the evangelical counsels - poverty, obedience and chastity, or celibacy<sup>1</sup>. We are primarily talking about celibacy here.

Affirmation of priestly celibacy as an appropriate witness, as a real symbol of the orientation of life towards the Lord. This is embedded within a long tradition, in spiritual experience, and in the community-creating strength of opting for a celibate life which unites large numbers of priests.

**At the same time, we perceive an unease among God's people - and also among ourselves - that has been going on for many decades. It is becoming stronger rather than weaker. This unease relates not so much to celibacy itself. As every way of life, celibacy has its strengths and weaknesses, moments of joy and moments of renunciation, life-enhancing aspects, and dangers.**

The many difficulties of living in celibacy outside of communities are only to be touched on here. They include loneliness, the danger of addiction, unresolved issues related to old age, etc. We also perceive malformations of a life of celibacy. The mainstays of celibacy have fallen away, so that it has become a precarious way of life for some. For example, the *vita communis*, where several priests live together in a large presbytery, is becoming increasingly rare. What is more, the virtual disappearance of the long-valued service of parish housekeepers living in the presbytery together with the priests has consequences that need to be considered. The viability of celibacy, involving integration into a parish family, was part of its justification in training for the priesthood for decades. This has disappeared in the large parishes, as has the often mentioned diversity in encounters with the different generations of a parish. All these points require lifelong work on relational skills. Whilst this is primarily the responsibility of the priest, it also needs to be made possible through training, professional development, superiors and church regulations. It would go beyond the limits of this implementation text to take a differentiated look at all these issues.

**Our unease about celibacy is therefore not about celibacy per se. It concerns the question of whether this celibacy must be affirmed by all who wish to become priests, or whether there is not a need for different choices to be available. Inner unease, as well as inner peace, are signs in the tradition of the discernment of spirits that need to be taken seriously. Such a discernment needs to be carried out because God can work through it and in it. Could it be that God is seeking to point us in a particular direction through this very unease? It is the following aspects to which we refer in concrete terms:**

Celibacy is not the only appropriate witness for the discipleship of Jesus. Sacramental marriage, for instance, also points to God's love and unbreakable faithfulness towards His people, as it is already set out in Ephesians (*Eph 5:31-32*). It has not been possible since the Second Vatican Council at the latest to responsibly claim that a celibate way of life is of higher value<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 5.4 The evangelical counsels in the foundational text of Synodal Forum II.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. inter alia: "Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect." (*LG 11*); "If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (cf. *2 Peter 1:1*). And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and

Unmarried people can be a resource for married people, and vice versa. Given their broad diversity, the vocations need and support one another.

Marriage and celibacy are therefore complementary ways of life. Celibacy testifies to the orientation of a person towards God, above all in the mode of an enduring yearning. Marriage testifies that God's love for us as people can become manifest in a concrete way. The priestly witness of life as a whole is enriched when both forms are lived out by priests.

For all the value of celibacy, there were also traditional lines of justification for celibacy that were motivated by hostility towards the body and sexuality. The idea of cultic purity, for example, is not a helpful category, and has contributed to a clericalistic glorification. There is also no longer any basis for the economic considerations that were important in the High Middle Ages (right of inheritance in view of benefices, etc.).

In addition, we see men who discover in an intensive process - before or after their ordination to the priesthood - that they are called to marriage, and at the same time feel an inner vocation to enter the priesthood<sup>3</sup>. Their gifts, which could complement those of celibate priests, are lost to our Church because their two vocations, namely to the priesthood and to marriage, are generally regarded in the Latin Church as being incompatible. We are therefore not doing sufficient justice to the charisms and vocations existing here, or to the pastoral needs of the faithful.

Just as the celibacy of priests has a long tradition in our Church, albeit it is not uninterrupted, this applies to the possibility and the reality of married priests. Founded in the Biblical witness (*1 Tim 3* and frequently), married ministers are a blessed reality, not only in the Orthodox Churches, but also in the Eastern Catholic Churches. The admission of married men to priestly ordination is an exception in the Latin Church, but it is not unthinkable, especially since experience with them and with their acceptance on the part of the faithful is rather positive in many cases. The same applies to the priests from Eastern Catholic Churches who have long been living in some of our congregations. Taking the step towards an exemption from celibacy would therefore not be a departure into completely new territory.

The obligation to observe celibacy poses a very real danger that it will only be accepted as a consequence of the choice of vocation. The claim that it is thus understood as a witness can hardly be fulfilled in these cases. Many priests who have already been ordained increasingly suffer from the general suspicion that they did not choose celibacy freely. Religious report that the reactions to their celibacy are much more positive, precisely because this choice is completely voluntary.

To put it very simply, priests choose a profession which is then associated with a way of life. Religious, on the other hand, choose a way of life which may then be associated with a

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to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ." (LG 32); "Thus in their diversity all bear witness to the wonderful unity in the Body of Christ. This very diversity of graces, ministries and works gathers the children of God into one, because "all these things are the work of one and the same Spirit" (*1 Cor 12:11*)." (LG 32)

<sup>3</sup> We are aware that there is also a question of homosexual priests. We refer to the following implementation text of Synodal Forum II: Breaking with taboos and normalisation - votes on the situation of non-heterosexual priests.

profession. In addition, religious usually live in communities, and this communal life may mitigate some of the dangers of celibacy.

Many in the Synodal Assembly are convinced that the abolition of compulsory celibacy will make continence for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven more visible as a “special gift of God” (*Can 277*), and will enhance its symbolic character for the dawning Kingdom of God. How extensive such an opening of the priestly ministry for married men could be arranged, or what steps should be taken on this path, will have to be weighed up wisely. Many faithful would like to see a complete opening. Others - including members of the Synodal Assembly - advocate taking a more cautious approach. Still others wish to hold on to the status quo on this issue.

The abuse crisis has taught us that obligatory celibacy may attract a disproportionately large number of men who are unsure of their sexuality, of their sexual identity and orientation, and wish to avoid confronting it. The regressive immature type, as a third group of people accused of sexual assault, exhibits these characteristics<sup>4</sup>. The MHG Study concludes from this that it is the obligation to observe celibacy - not celibacy per se - that might promote sexual abuse through these and other constellations<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, we also consider pastoral reality as it reveals itself to us to be a sign that there is a need for change. We see people who long to make use of priestly ministries, and of sacramental ones in particular, while the number of those who can offer this ministry to them is rapidly diminishing in our country. The Church defines Herself as the community that is gathered around the Eucharist as its centre. What if a community no longer has sufficient access to the Eucharist? Is it legitimate and meaningful to argue from a position of shortage? We believe that the shortage of priests is not the only reason, and that it is not the only decisive reason, for the desire to abolish obligatory celibacy. We however regard the pastoral distress brought about by the shortage of priests as a sign of the times that should be taken seriously. We believe that access to the celebration of the Eucharist, as well as to the sacraments of the anointing of the sick and forgiveness, is to be valued more highly than the obligation to maintain celibacy. The reduction in the number of priests due to celibacy is also affecting many who are already in the ministry (and are celibate), as they are increasingly overburdened and less and less able to live out their spirituality.

The latter two facts, the experience of thousands of sexual abuses by celibate priests, and the pastoral distress, point in the same direction, and reinforce the weight of the argument, so that we come to the following conclusions in our discernment of spirits:

The Church naturally has an obligation to ensure that the rules and regulations which She establishes serve the life of the people and evangelisation. Just as there is a theological

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. in: “Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference” (*MHG Study*), 282.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. inter alia in: “Sexual abuse of minors committed by Catholic priests, deacons and male religious in the sphere of the German Bishops’ Conference” (*MHG Study*), 11; 12-13. This problem indicator is explicitly mentioned there, without offering suggestions for a solution. See on this also Chapter 3 Change structures that promote abuse and underlying topics of the foundational text. Other problem areas, such as inadequate personality development, etc., are dealt with in the implementation text entitled “Professionalisation” of the Synodal Forum “Priestly existence today”. This must be taken seriously, even where abuse also occurs in non-celibate contexts. This is one potential danger, but by no means the only one.

hierarchy of truths, there are also precedences and subordinate orders that must always be newly weighted in the organisation of the salvific ministry in the Church. If obligatory celibacy hinders priests' witness and pastoral ministry, this rule should be changed.

We understand all these factors as signs of the times that make it necessary to adopt the following votes:

### **Vote 1**

The Synodal Assembly therefore asks the Holy Father to reconsider the connection of the conferral of ordination with the commitment to celibacy in the synodal process of the World Synod (2021-2023).

Even if the concrete practice of the Eastern Catholic Churches in this area, for example with regard to the importance of monasticism, cannot be simply transferred to the reality of the Latin Church, taking a look at the Eastern Church's tradition nonetheless shows that diversity in the shaping of the priestly way of life was and is always a real possibility for the Church.

### **Vote 2**

The Synodal Assembly now asks the Holy Father to take the following concrete steps, pending the possible implementation of the previous motion:

There has been consideration in this regard since the Würzburg Synod at the latest of *virii probati*. The Amazon Synod proposes to define as a first step "to ordain as priests suitable and respected men of the community [...] who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate."<sup>6</sup> Many additional options have become conceivable in our Church today.

One might for instance consider particular-church arrangements, on the basis of which experience could first be gained in one region of the world as to how such an opening would affect priests who have already been ordained, priests who are to be ordained in the future, and last but not least the faithful and the witness of the Church.

Another possibility would be dispensations in individual instances, as is the case with married Evangelical pastors who have converted to the Catholic Church. Such dispensations can be granted even more generously. The right to give such a dispensation is currently reserved to the Apostolic See (*can. 1047 §2 No. 3*). This reservation can be lifted for individual local churches if the respective local bishop so requests. This would require an appropriate intra-diocesan process and consultation with the Bishops' Conference. If the Apostolic See consents to this, the authority for a dispensation then lies with the local bishop, who is in a better position to assess the situation on the ground.

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<sup>6</sup> Final Document of the Amazon Synod, 111.

### **Vote 3**

The Synodal Assembly asks the Holy Father, after any general exemption from the vow of celibacy for future ordinations of priests of the Latin rite, to also give priests who have already been ordained the possibility of being released from the vow of celibacy without having to renounce exercising the ministry.

### **b) Votes on priests leaving the ministry due to a partnership**

#### **Guidance:**

Every employee or civil servant has to accept negative consequences associated with the premature termination of his/her employment. Not all of these can and must be absorbed by the previous employer. This also applies as a matter of principle to leaving the priestly ministry. That said, from a point of view of justice and legal certainty, this departure, which is more than a professional caesura pure and simple, entails disproportionate disadvantages. The reasons for leaving are quite varied. A significant majority however have to renounce the priestly ministry because of a partnership.

### **Vote 4**

The Synodal Assembly has requested the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of Catholics to commission a social science study on the situation of suspended and dispensed priests, and to present it to the public no later than 2024. The aim is a quantitative and qualitative survey of ecclesiastical, professional and family situations, as well as of individual personal faith biographies. It is also important to ascertain the willingness to continue in a pastoral profession, or even to become active in the priestly ministry.

### **Vote 5**

The Synodal Path has commissioned the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of Catholics to set up a working group, with the involvement of suspended and dispensed priests. The focus of the work of the working group is on taking a compassionate approach (a), and on the legal provisions (b).

- a. Collecting best-practice examples for a way of dealing with suspended and dispensed priests on the part of the dioceses that is convincing in human terms (regular invitations to engage in a joint exchange, forms of involvement in the priests' council and synodal bodies, naming in the schematism, etc.) and handing them over to the dioceses for the desired implementation. The aim is to overcome disenfranchisement and prevent alienation.

b. Dispensed priests should as a matter of principle be able to apply for ecclesiastical vocations that are open to all lay people<sup>7</sup>. Integration into a pastoral ministry should take priority, and should be actively promoted by the diocesan leadership. Binding, legally-secure rules<sup>8</sup> should be developed for all, and orientated towards civil-society standards<sup>9</sup>, as is the case when other pastoral employees leave their posts.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf.: Joint Synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany, *Beschluss: Dienste und Ämter* 5.6.2.: “If a priest who has left the ministry wishes to take up a full-time ministry in the Church which is also open to lay people, such posts are to ... be open to him.”

<sup>8</sup> Arrangements would for instance have to be established on questions related to health insurance (for example: maintaining the entitlement to medical expenses assistance [*Beihilfe*]) and pension insurance (church supplementary pension fund) which have to apply in all German dioceses. (This would mean a further revision of employment law.)

<sup>9</sup> A duty of maintenance on the part of the bishop can be derived from can. 281 §1 and §2 CIC until the dispensation from the obligation of celibacy, requiring that a caring approach be taken towards priests who have left the ministry.