



Presentation of the Synodal Forum IV

**“Life in succeeding relationships
- Living love in sexuality and partnership”**

for the Second Reading

**at the Fifth Synodal Assembly (9 - 11 March
2023) for the implementation text**

**“Blessing ceremonies for couples who love each
other”**

[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 18 Yes, 3 No]

Introduction

The Church wants to unequivocally proclaim the message of the God-given dignity of every person in word and deed. This message guides her in her dealings with people and their partnerships. Therefore, she offers recognition and accompaniment to couples who are united in love, who treat each other with full respect and dignity, and who are prepared to live their sexuality for the long term with care for themselves, for each other and in social responsibility.

There are couples who ask for a blessing for their partnership. This request is based on the gratitude for experienced love and the hope for an accompanied future. It is an expression of a relationship with God either of one or of both partners.

Motion

The Synodal Assembly calls on the bishops to officially allow blessing ceremonies in their dioceses for couples who love each other but to whom sacramental marriage is not accessible or who do not see themselves at a point of entering into a sacramental marriage. This also applies to same-sex couples on the basis of a re-evaluation of homosexuality as a norm variant of human sexuality. These are couples who have bound themselves, for example, through a civil marriage. The blessing ceremony differs from the liturgy of a sacramental marriage.

- The German dioceses will establish such blessing ceremony as a diocesan liturgy.
- The German dioceses present a blessing form for this purpose. They can draw on the preparatory work of various dioceses, the Working Group for Catholic Family Education (AKF), the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and relevant practical experience.
The Synod Assembly proposes that a manual for such blessing celebrations be prepared and later included in the benedictional to be revised. This mandate will be implemented in consultation with the German Liturgical Institute.
- The manual includes suggested forms for blessing ceremonies in the context of services of the word or the Eucharist, as well as a pastoral-theological introduction and pastoral-practical advice. The suggestions address the various couple situations (such as remarried divorcees, same-sex couples, couples after civil marriage).
- Analogous to other celebrations, such a ceremony may be presided over by ordained ministers or persons with an episcopal mandate to worship.
- In order to be able to organise such a blessing ceremony in a safe and appropriate way, further training is suggested. For an appropriate training curriculum, as well as material and literature references, we can refer to the preliminary work of various dioceses and the work of the AKF (Working Group for Catholic Family Education).
- No pastor who conducts such a blessing ceremony will face disciplinary consequences in Germany. An obligation to lead such a ceremony is not imposed on anyone. Those who, for reasons of conscience, do not wish to preside over such a celebration, refer the couple to colleagues or a diocesan contact person who will assist the couple in finding a person to lead the ceremony.
- For all interested couples, preparatory talks with pastors and, if necessary, seminars are planned. Here the joint life situation may be taken into consideration.
- The manual will be evaluated five years after its official use. During this time, experience with this practice will be gathered and evaluated for the Church in Germany.

Reasoning

Many people long for commitment and love in binding partnerships. They choose to express commitment in their relationship in different ways.

It has become a common experience in pastoral practice that same-sex loving couples ask for a blessing for their partnership. So do civilly remarried couples who dare to make a new start in a new partnership. Couples who do not yet consider themselves ready for the sacrament of marriage also do so. Often, they want to meet the interests of a partnership in which only one partner is a believer or is close to the Catholic Church. Increasingly, unbaptised couples are asking for a blessing.

A blessing for all these partnerships is not currently provided for. The explanatory note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has confirmed this with regard to homosexual couples. However, the response to the questionnaires in the context of the Synod of Bishops has

shown that the view of homosexuality underlying this document is not considered sufficient in many places and needs further theological development. The Synodal Assembly has accordingly adopted a proposal that can be incorporated into the worldwide synodal process. On a practical level, the request for blessing is already fulfilled in many German-speaking local churches. The decision to bestow this blessing is therefore made by the pastors according to their conscience and in many cases in conflict with magisterial guidelines. This situation of ambiguity and inconsistency is clarified, secured and liturgically organized with the present resolution.

The refusal to bless the relationship of two people who want to live their partnership in love, commitment and responsibility to each other and to God proves to be merciless or even discriminatory in a society that has achieved human dignity and free self-determination as maxims of moral standardisation. This is all the more serious because such a refusal cannot be convincingly justified in terms of the theology of grace. This not only burdens the proclamation of God's philanthropy and the double commandment of loving one's neighbour and God, but also raises serious questions about the credibility of liturgical action in our cultural sphere. Reference can be made to the *Relatio Finalis* of the Synodal Assembly of 2015 and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (19 March 2016). Pope Francis' letter is ambiguous with regard to the appreciation of non-sacramental partnerships and a possible analogy to sacramental marriage (cf. AL 251 and AL 292). What is clear, however, is the distancing from the classic assessment of couples who do not live together in a sacramental union. For Pope Francis "it can no longer simply be said that all those in any "irregular" situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace." (AL 301)

The subject of this resolution is a blessing ceremony. The concern that the Church could thereby approve a sinful situation has so far stood in the way of an official recognition of such a blessing. This concern loses plausibility through the further development undertaken by Pope Francis. The celebration differs from a marriage ceremony. Liturgical possibilities to avoid an analogy to marriage are sufficiently available. The blessing reinforces what already exists in the couple relationship in terms of love, commitment and mutual responsibility. God's support is requested and promised for the future of all that is good.

Extensions in the area of acts of blessing are supported by the explanations in the booklet published by the Liturgy Commission of the German Bishops' Conference on liturgy-related celebrations "*Christus in der Welt verkünden*" and derived from the benedictional. In the benedictional, introduction No. 36 opens up the possibility of adaptation and benediction 99 provides a template that can be adapted to a wide variety of situations.

The offers of blessing ceremonies are based on the conviction that there is moral value in the common life of couples who live together in commitment and responsibility for each other. Where faith is involved, what is good is worthy of blessing. The Church is enriched by the love of these couples. Such mutual love calls for a blessing. God is present where people love each other.

The offer of a blessing ceremony is based on a primal human need: "People are in need of blessings. They long for salvation, protection, happiness and fulfilment in their lives. That is why people speak blessings to each other. Above all, they hope for and ask blessings from God". (*Benedictional* No. 1) This request for and hope of blessing is already of great relevance and it shows a longing for God that must be taken seriously. A blessing expresses that people want to

shape their relationship in the horizon of God and orient themselves on the Gospel. Strengthened by the blessing, these couples make their Christian faith and their relationship with God fruitful in their partnership, in their families, among friends and in their congregations, and sow the seeds for further blessings in and for our Church. In order to fulfil the mission of the Church to proclaim God's promise in the contemporary world, new liturgical forms must be found at all times. The Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* explicitly encourages the development of liturgical forms, even on a regional basis (cf. SC 22 § 2 and 63).

The blessing ceremonies presented are an example of such inculturation. The assessment of the diversity of lasting relationships and the mutual responsibility perceived in them has changed in Germany. Partnerships that are binding and loving are met with a high level of social acceptance - irrespective of a previous union or the gender of the two partners. This esteem must also find a convincing expression in the liturgy of the Church. This is how the Church lives up to her claim "They borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, or enhance the grace of their Saviour, or dispose Christian life the way it should be." (AG 22). At the same time, this shows the deep conviction of the Church: "The experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, by all of which the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened, these profit the Church, too." (GS 44)

Often same-sex couples and remarried divorcees have experienced exclusion and depreciation in our Church. The possibility of publicly placing their partnership under God's blessing does not make up for these experiences. However, it offers the Church the opportunity to show appreciation for the love and values that exist in these relationships and thus ask for forgiveness and make reconciliation possible.

The blessing is a sign for many couples and their children to be accepted in this Church and the congregations are encouraged to welcome them.