



**“For a synodal Church –
community, participation and mission”**

**The report of the German Bishops' Conference
to the World Synod of Bishops 2023**

The following report is divided into two parts. The first reflects on experiences with synodal processes in the (arch)dioceses and at the level of the German Bishops' Conference, and also incorporates synodal experiences into this process from the member organisations of the Council of Christian Churches (ACK) in Germany.

The second part summarises the feedback from the German (arch)dioceses on the ten topics listed in the official manual for consultations in the local churches (“Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality”, Ch. 5.3).

Part I

Reflection on synodal experiences in the Church in Germany

1. Synodal processes in the dioceses and at the level of the Bishops' Conference

After the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church in Germany started to develop synodal structures which were intended to facilitate the broad participation of the faithful in the mission of the Church. This process was supported above all by the strong Catholic associations, which had developed from the 19th Century onwards as self-organised associations of the laity, and had created a national representative body as early as in 1868 in the shape of the Committee of German Catholics.

In order to implement the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council in West Germany, the bishops in the Federal Republic of Germany convened a Joint Synod (1971-1975), which met in Würzburg. The Synod's statutes, which were approved by the Holy See in 1970, provided for broad participation on the part of religious, and especially of lay people, in the deliberations and decisions of the Synod. The Pastoral Synod of the Catholic Church in the GDR met in Dresden from 1973 to 1975 with similar objectives and strong lay participation.

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Both Synods spent much time addressing the question of how the joint responsibility of all faithful for the mission of the Church could be accomplished. The resolution entitled “Ministries and orders in the life of the congregation”, adopted by the Pastoral Synod in Dresden, and the resolution entitled “The joint responsibility of the whole people of God for the mission of the Church” of the Joint Synod in Würzburg, were ground-breaking for the development of the Church moving forward. A council of Catholics (also referred to in some places as the lay council or diocesan council) was founded on this basis in the ensuing years at diocesan level as a body representing the laity. This came in addition to the presbyteral council, the pastoral council and the finance council, the tasks and composition of which were subsequently regulated in the CIC of 1983 (cf. Can. 492-514). There is also a church tax council, which is charged with administering the church tax which dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany levy as corporations under public law. The specific structure of the bodies, as well as the rights and duties of the councils, are regulated differently from one diocese to another.

Parish councils have been established at parish level, and their members are largely elected by the faithful. They advise the pastor on pastoral matters, whilst at the same time carrying out the apostolate of the laity. In addition, a parochial board has existed in Germany for some time which manages the economical assets of the parish in accordance with national law.

A Joint Conference of the German Bishops' Conference and the Committee of German Catholics was established in order to promote interaction between bishops and the laity. This Conference includes representatives of both bodies, and meets twice per year. Inspired by the Synod in Würzburg, the composition of the Committee has also changed since that time to include delegates from the councils of Catholics.

The communication between bishops, priests, laity and religious in the Synods of Würzburg and Dresden was a highly encouraging experience for many faithful. The members of the Synods therefore requested in a Vote submitted to the Pope that the dioceses in Germany be given the right to hold a Joint Synod every decade. This request was however turned down.

The synodal structures created as a result of the Synods of Dresden and Würzburg shape the culture of the collaboration between bishops, priests and the laity, and enable broad participation. That having been said, developments over recent decades have been characterised by tendencies in the other direction, as the religious behaviour and ties to the Church on the part of the faithful have changed. Whereas roughly 37.5% of Catholics regularly attended Sunday services and participated in parish life in 1970, this figure had fallen to around 10% in 2019. The number of people who vote in elections to the parish council and parochial board has also fallen in line with this, so that the committees and councils only represent the faithful in formal terms today. The associations too are affected by a decline in membership. Whilst the vast majority of church members show little interest in actively participating in the life of the Church, a large proportion of lay people who are active in the Church consider the existing

opportunities to help shape the Church to be insufficient. This calls for a more binding form of participation in decision-making in the leadership of parishes and dioceses.

The decline in the number of Church members, and consequently in revenue from church taxes, as well as the shortage of priests and pastoral workers, have forced the German dioceses to reorganise pastoral care in parishes for several years. In addition to the participation of the committees and councils, several dioceses have therefore conducted diocesan synods in accordance with can. 460 CIC, or in *sui generis* consultation processes involving faithful who are not members of the existing bodies. In 2010, the German Bishops' Conference invited people to take part in a discussion process entitled "Living in faith today: Where do we stand?", lasting five years, in the course of which there was a stocktake of the Church in Germany concerning the fundamental activities *martyria*, *diaconia* and *leiturgia* under the options *communicatio*, *compassio* and *participatio*. Representatives of the Committee of German Catholics, the religious orders, the associations, movements, professors of theology and the ecclesiastical vocations (e.g. pastoral workers) were invited to take part. The discussions were held in the wake of the sexual abuse of minors that was uncovered at the Canisius-Kolleg in Berlin in 2010. The numerous cases of sexual abuse that have come to light since then, and the structural failure on the part of those responsible in the dioceses, has done lasting damage to trust among the faithful in bishops' moral competence and leadership abilities.

2. The Synodal Path

The publication in 2018 of the scholarly "MHG Study" commissioned by the German Bishops' Conference (named after the locations of the institutes at which the participating scholars were employed: Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen) triggered a fresh wave of alarm and consternation. The results of the study clearly showed that this was not only a matter of individual failure, but that systemic reasons favoured sexual abuse in the Church and the way in which it was being covered up. Along with large numbers of concrete aspects of the problem, and suggestions as to how to deal with this phenomenon and stop it happening in the future, the study therefore also addressed more fundamental issues which the authors believe need to be further clarified, namely the question of how to deal with power, and how to control power and decision-making powers in the Church, the further development of the profile of the priestly ministry and priestly lifestyle, as well as the Church's handling of questions concerning sexual morality. It soon became clear in the discussion of these issues that the question of the position of women in the Church is closely linked to the issues already mentioned, and is equally urgent. These questions are by no means new in the debate within the Church in Germany. They have been the subject of discussion for several decades, but have gained a fresh, new topicality due to the dynamics described above.

It was against this background that the German bishops decided in the spring of 2019 to call on the Committee of German Catholics to embark together with them on a Synodal Path, jointly supported by the German Bishops' Conference and the Committee. The Path aims to move forward on the issues, problems and prospective reforms at hand in a synodally-structured way

and in a dialogue that is engaged in on an equal footing. The Synodal Path is a path of conversion and renewal, prompted by the shameful realisation of both individual and structural failures in dealing with sexual violence, but also driven by the certainty that the Church needs to be renewed from the core of Her being in order to be, unhindered, the Church of Jesus Christ, a witness to the Gospel, and the pilgrim people of God through the ages. After the German Bishops' Conference had unanimously endorsed the Synodal Path, a minority of bishops in the early stages also disapproved of the path embarked upon. They questioned the causal link between sexual abuse and the four topics. They are convinced that the abuse was facilitated not as a result of the teaching and the discipline, but because of a failure to comply with them. They were furthermore critical of what they saw as the insufficiently spiritual dimension of the Path.

Encouraged and set on its course by Pope Francis, who addressed the Synodal Path in his *Letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany*, a form of synodal deliberation and decision-making *sui generis* was chosen on the Synodal Path which does not have the character of a plenary council under formal canonical law. The Synodal Path on which the German Bishops' Conference and the Committee of German Catholics have embarked is designed to enable committed Catholics to participate, and to incorporate existing expertise, whilst at the same time also respecting the decision-making competence of the bishops which is indispensable in both ecclesiological terms and under canonical law. The Synodal Path is furthermore a spiritual process within which deliberations and reflections are engaged in, and resolutions are adopted, not only from discussing and debating together, but also from praying and celebrating the Eucharist together.

The structure of the Synodal Path is such that it takes up the existing organisational forms of commitment to the Church, and integrates them into a joint process of deliberation and decision-making. A Synodal Assembly made up of 230 members forms the Plenary of the Synodal Path, and is to come together a total of five times over a period of three years in order to adopt resolutions. The resolutions are prepared in four Synodal Forums made up of approximately 35 members each (male and female members of the Synods per se, as well as other experts), who are to address the abovementioned sets of topics. Despite the difficulties that the coronavirus pandemic has created for the Synodal Path, it has nonetheless been possible to carry out continuous, constructive work. There is an individual in each (arch)diocese who acts as a contact for the process and the topics of the four Forums via suitable event and discussion formats, thus enabling the faithful to accompany the Synodal Path. There has been a broad response to the Synodal Assemblies among the public, both inside and outside the Church, but the echo in the parishes themselves has been very restrained.

The core aim of the Synodal Path is to address the systemic causes of abuse and its concealment, so that the Gospel can be credibly proclaimed once more in the future. The continuity of teaching and the communion of the universal Church must be preserved in this process. Considerable importance therefore attached to dealing responsibly and reflectively with the sources of knowledge of the faith and theology (the "*loci theologici*"). University theologians

assist in these consultations on the Synodal Path. It is equally important when dealing with the reform concerns of the Synodal Path, to consider the opportunities and limitations which exist at the decision-making level of the dioceses and of the Bishops' Conference, and to examine the concerns that must be brought into the dialogue with the universal Church. Not least for this reason, Catholics in Germany also look ahead with hope to the Synodal Path of the universal Church. They see this Path as a good opportunity, firstly, to integrate their own synodal experiences, and secondly to also contribute the insights that they have gained when it comes to the further steps that the Church needs to take on Her journey of pilgrimage through time.

3. Ecumenical consultation

14 out of the 29 member organisations of the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) which have been consulted, including Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), and Free Churches of various traditions as well as the Old Catholic Church and other Churches, have input their synodal experiences and theological reflections to the consultations of the German Bishops' Conference for the World Synod of Bishops. The feedback shows that a strong development of synodal structures correlates with broad participation on the part of the faithful in the Church's decision-making processes, especially in Evangelical and free-church contexts. Some Churches which have long-standing experience with synodality point out that synodal processes do not always lead to a consensus being reached on controversial theological or moral issues, and that it is sometimes not possible to do more than establish a way of dealing with dissent that is acceptable to everyone. A summary of the feedback will be prepared separately and made available.

Part II

Summary of the feedback from the German (arch)dioceses

Preliminary remarks

1. The following report of the German Bishops' Conference is a summary of the feedback from the 27 (arch)dioceses as well as from the Catholic Office of the Military Bishop on the ten sets of topics of the World Synod of Bishops. Even though they are written by those holding responsibility at diocesan level, all the reports from the dioceses attempt to reflect original voices, and above all to reproduce the mood in the congregations and communities, as well as in the parishes and institutions of their dioceses.
2. The number of faithful in the dioceses who took part in the survey for the World Synod of Bishops is in the bottom single-digit percentage range. The dioceses nonetheless note that all groups of committed faithful are represented: women and men, clergy and laity, full-timers and voluntary workers, young and old. That having been said, it was virtually impossible to get any disenchanting and unchurched people involved.
3. In their reports, the dioceses reflect on existing synodal structures from the parish through the deaneries, to the level of the diocese (see Part I, No. 1 above). It is positively noted that

synodality has been practised here for a number of years. New synodal formats such as diocesan pastoral councils or discussions on the future are well received. Critically, it is pointed out that

- it is virtually impossible to find candidates for some formats (e.g. in parish council elections), as well as participants (e.g. for the diocesan process of the World Synod of Bishops),
- the majority of people involved belong to the middle and upper classes of society,
- the participation of lay people is often geared towards consultation, and not genuine co-determination and co-decision-making,
- considerable numbers of the faithful doubt that the Church is sincere in Her desire for genuine synodality.

It is therefore considered indispensable to grow the structures that are in place in order to bring about greater synodality.

4. A wish is expressed in the feedback from the dioceses for the topics of the Synodal Path in Germany (1. Power and separation of powers in the Church, 2. Priestly existence today, 3. Women in ministries and offices in the Church, 4. Life in succeeding relationships) to be integrated into the World Synod of Bishops as expressing important concerns of the local churches. Lending fresh credibility to the Church in Germany, and to Her mission in today's society, is seen as a prerequisite for tackling the reforms needed within the Church relating to these topics (see Part I, No. 2 above).
5. In addition to the diocesan reports, some bishops point out that individual groups among the faithful complain about a lack of spiritual depth and strength of the faith, and call for a greater commitment to a renewal of the relationship with Christ, as is already taking place in some dioceses. This concern is also mentioned in the reports from the dioceses, see in Part II, nos. 4 and 9 below as well as frequent other mentions.
6. Criticism was repeatedly voiced that the preparatory document and the Vademecum for the World Synod of Bishops were formulated in an "internal language" which many faithful found themselves unable to understand, and that the ten topics presented lacked the necessary clarity and consistency with the challenges that the German dioceses are facing. This is said to have at least made the synodal process in the dioceses more difficult.
7. Some dioceses therefore focused in their reports on concrete proposals for the motto of the World Synod of Bishops "For a Synodal Church – Communion, Participation and Mission". The problems and demands listed in these reports were subsequently assigned to the ten topics for the summary report of the German Bishops' Conference.
8. The expressions and sentences placed in inverted commas in the summary below are quotations from the feedback received from the dioceses. Efforts were made to ensure that voices from all the German dioceses were heard.

The feedback on the ten topics

1. A fellowship of companions

The reports from the dioceses show that the faithful as a whole see themselves as being in a

broad fellowship: in their parishes, with associations, religious orders and spiritual communities, in ecumenism, with Catholics who speak different mother tongues, with people from other religions and ideologies. Especially the dioceses in Eastern Germany understand their Christianity as a diaspora among people who have neither a denomination nor a religion.

The following people find themselves marginalised

- those who do not conform to the teachings of the Church (e.g. LGBTQ people, people who have experienced caesuras in their lives, people who have left the Church...),
- those who are excluded from church offices or ministries (especially women, but also married men, young people, volunteers),
- those who do not belong to the educated middle class (e.g. people affected by poverty, people with a migration background ...).

“We often keep to ourselves”, is something that is noted several times in a spirit of self-criticism. The future challenge is said to consist of “moving out of the comfort zone of the role as a host to become a guest in the lives of our fellow human beings.”

This equates to a longing for new forms of community. The Church of the future will take place “in small communities in which lay people play a leading role. They should be well networked in all areas of society...”.

2. Listening

The feedback from the dioceses addresses the topic of listening very extensively and intensively. Listening to God, to the faithful and to people, as well as to the signs of the times, is seen as the foundation of a synodal process. Listening needs to be learned and practised as an attitude. This involves respect, impartiality, openness, patience, empathy, as well as a willingness to learn and change... Listening that does not lead to joint decision-making and concrete action does not go far enough.

Such listening is more of an option than a reality. Criticism is voiced that bishops or vicars general, priests and full-time pastoral workers do not listen to lay people, volunteers, young people, “simple faithful”, ... or that they do not listen enough. The Church is perceived as an “institution that defines but does not listen”. Other voices miss listening to God together in the services, in the contemplation of the Scriptures, or in the interaction with the poor. People do not want to be merely heard; they want there to be a shared listening and an open-ended process in the Church. This takes time and requires freedoms.

It was commented that an important result of a synodal process in both the local churches and in the universal Church is to develop a “culture of listening and perception”.

3. Speaking out

The majority of the responses from the dioceses call for the Church to become more closely involved in the discourse within society on socially-relevant issues (and not only issues that are interesting for the Church). These include climate change, social justice, human dignity, poverty and migration, war and peace...

A lot of catching up also needs to be done in terms of the representation and presentation of the Church in social and digital media. "The general perception of the Church in media outside the Church is seen as encrusted, overly hierarchical, and old-fashioned". Lay people – women, young people and volunteers in particular – want to make themselves heard in the media as the voice of the Church in the same way as their bishops.

But the words are only credible if they correspond to conduct as an individual and as a Church. There is often talk of a profound ashamedness when it comes to confessing and speaking out as a Christian in the secular sphere because of the massive scandals in the Church (sexual and sexualised violence against children and adults, abuse of power by priests and bishops, wasted money ...).

Doubts are frequently voiced within the Church that an open discussion can take place in an atmosphere that is free of anxiety. There are taboo topics that cannot be discussed openly within the Church, especially questions related to sexuality (such as contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage...). Theologians are afraid of having their teaching licences revoked if they make nuanced, open statements. Lay people feel inferior to, and frequently not understood by, clerics and other people with a theological background in their ability to speak out and have their say.

The reports from the dioceses refer to the Synodal Path in Germany as a place where "genuine, frank debate" is being tried out, and they expect this to continue and develop in the World Synod of Bishops.

4. Celebrations

The reports from the dioceses bear witness to the fact that high-quality liturgy is being celebrated in all the German dioceses, and that this is especially evident in the Sunday Eucharist. The Eucharist continues to be highly significant in the lives of many faithful.

But the massive decline in the number of priests, and thus of places to celebrate the Eucharist, the almost exclusively older and female churchgoers, the shrinking congregations – exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and by never-ending scandals involving bishops and priests – also show that the Eucharist is losing its meaning for not inconsiderable numbers of the faithful. They feel that there is a marked disconnect between their daily lives and the Sunday liturgy. There is a need for an interpretation of the rites, for a concrete, understandable language, for them to be implemented in a manner that relates to the reality of people's lives, in order to

counteract the widespread “liturgical illiteracy”. Large numbers of concrete proposals have been put forward: a ministry of preaching carried out by lay people, a reform of the lectionary, services in simple language, a culture of welcome, a closing of the gap between the chancel and the congregation...

Liturgical celebrations led by appropriately trained women, young people and volunteers... are welcomed, e.g. word of God celebrations, liturgy of the hours, funeral liturgy, digital services... The experience from the dioceses suggests that these forms of service allow for more active participation (than in a Eucharist that is perceived as being centred on a priest). They also allow the charism of for instance women to be brought to bear in the proclamation and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Such liturgical celebrations are to be expanded because they keep the worship life alive in places where it is no longer possible for a priest to be in attendance. There is an explicit wish for liturgical baptism celebrations and marriage support to be provided by lay people. Greater diversity overall is called for in both alternative and traditional forms of worship in order to appeal to different groups of faithful.

“Many Christians increasingly yearn for a genuine relationship with Christ, and one of the challenges ahead is to nurture those who are seeking and to launch a culture of spiritual fellowship”.

5. Shared responsibility in the mission

The statement of the German bishops entitled “*Gemeinsam Kirche sein*” (Being a Church together) (2015), and similar pastoral processes in virtually all German dioceses, have emphasised the responsibility of all baptised people, especially the laity, in the Church’s mission. In practice, however – according to the feedback from the dioceses – committed faithful feel thwarted in their responsibility for the mission. Decisions are made “top down”. There are no standards and rules for participation and involvement. This “dries up charisms, commitment and enthusiasm”. The latter are however needed to “proclaim the Gospel in the context of a modern, enlightened, human rights-orientated culture based on the principles of liberty”.

Shared responsibility within the mission can only be successful if the Church understands and shapes Her mission on the basis of the common priesthood of all baptised. “The majority of us would like to see more appreciation, support, pastoral care and recognition of the specialist skills of the many volunteers in the Church.” With this wish comes the confidence to “be more credible as a Church”.

In terms of content, the focus must be placed on “the diaconal work of the Church as an expression of the option for the poor”.

6. Dialogue in the Church and society

The desire for more dialogue between the Church and society runs through all the reports from the dioceses. Many feel unprepared and unable in particular to engage in dialogue with people in a secular society. According to the responses, dialogue both within the Church and in society tends to be conducted by experts, and to be largely unrelated to the everyday life of the congregations and faithful. A language that “comes down from above”, that is “official”, “overly intellectual” and “out of touch with life”, and thus has an exclusionary effect, is perceived as not being conducive to dialogue.

Conflicts or a lack of skills for dealing with a diversity of opinions and perspectives on life are often a hindrance to dialogue. These are conflicts within the Church between clergy and other full-timers (in pastoral care, in education, in Caritas...) and volunteers. It is not uncommon in the Church's dialogue with society for fronts to arise and form blocks between those who wish to distance themselves from the world, and those who see themselves as critical, constructive contemporaries of society. A majority suffers from this: For “wherever the Church does not intervene in the social reality surrounding Her, She closes Herself off to new stimuli, and it is then not easy to join in ‘from the outside’”.

Many fields of pastoral care such as pastoral care in the emergency services or in hospitals, in the police or in the military, therefore “see themselves as constituting the avantgarde, because in many ways they anticipate what is increasingly becoming the reality of the Churches in Europe: the situation of the minority, and the translation of Christian messages into settings and experiences outside of ecclesiasticism”.

In order to become capable of engaging in dialogue, first and foremost a different way of communicating is sought out, an exercise in “simple language”, “more questions than announcements”, “language coming more from the heart”, a “renunciation of status symbols and privileges”, making it possible to engage in a conversation with people “on an equal footing”.

“The Church must learn to step outside Her buildings, language games and rules, and go out to the people. Our language must be accessible, our interest genuine, and our message understandable.”

7. Ecumenism

Ecumenical cooperation is part of the self-understanding of the Church in Germany. Two challenges are identified that need to be addressed more intensively in the future:

- In a society in which Christians are increasingly in the minority, there is a need to reinforce cooperation and the joint Christian witness in ecumenism, for instance in religious instruction, in the shared use of church premises, in jointly shouldering pastoral care responsibilities, e.g. in prisons, in hospitals, in kindergartens ..., in taking up a joint

commitment to people in need, and last but not least also in Eucharistic hospitality...

- Migration has brought more Christian denominations and communities to Germany, thus creating a need to broaden ecumenical partnership and cooperation, e.g. with regard to Oriental Churches or indeed free churches. The exchange with Judaism and Islam should also be intensified.

There is an overall desire for “the common ground between the faithful to be emphasised more strongly than the differences which divide” for the sake of the witness of faith.

8. Authority and participation

“Lack of participation is a pain point overall, but conversely it also expresses a longing for participation.” Women, young people and volunteers in particular complain about their lack of participation: “We don’t want decisions to be made only about us, but with us.” The feedback from the dioceses therefore primarily contains suggestions as to how the interplay between authority and participation can be successful. This is a matter of attitudes (see above for topic No. 2), as well as structural changes.

There is a call amongst other things for the following in structural terms: participatory structures, transparency and participation in the selection of bishops and in the appointment of the local parish priest, time limits for offices and tasks, control of power and the exercise of power, detection and punishment of abuse of power, a feedback culture and channels for complaints... In specific terms, there is a call for women to participate in the World Synod of Bishops and to be entitled to vote there. Many responses relate to a “beneficial decentralisation of the Catholic Church”.

The wish was expressed several times for priests to be relieved of the leadership of the parish in terms of management and administration so that they can primarily devote themselves to pastoral care (in proclamation, in the sacraments, in counselling...). Leadership should be carried out by those who have the charism, training and skills to do so. “Ordination as a priest does not guarantee the ability to lead a congregation well... A good facilitator is not made through ordination, but by listening, allowing and appreciating those concerned”. Authority in the Church is understood as enabling and empowering others. “Leadership should serve the whole and enable what God has sown to grow.”

Some dioceses report that they have had good experiences with new forms of participative leadership at different levels within the diocese, where priests and lay people, full-timers and volunteers, men and women, share the leadership tasks according to their vocation, charism and skills. The experience is that shared leadership does not take anything away from anyone, including the priest, but rather enables shared learning to take place, even if it is demanding. “Where this succeeds, trust and commitment grow in the common mission.”

“Synodality means work. Lonely decisions are easier to make, but joint decisions are worthwhile because they are more sustainable.”

9. Perceiving the voice of the Holy Spirit and making decisions

The reports from the dioceses refer to established structures of joint deliberation, discernment and decision-making. This includes tried-and-tested forms of common spiritual listening to a word from Scripture, a spiritual impulse, or joint prayer. “The spiritual character of a common journey is shown just as powerfully by the manner in which processes and ways of dealing are perceptibly shaped by spiritual attitudes as it is by their explicit content and special times that are reserved for them.”

Some dioceses have already gathered experience with a joint spiritual decision-making process. This is often called for in order to reach a decision by (clergy and laity) listening to the Holy Spirit together (in the Holy Scriptures, in the signs of the times, in the people...), and in an open-ended process. Others fear that this masks a hidden agenda of the clergy and concealment of the de facto power imbalance. The massive loss of trust in the Church is having an effect here too. “The willingness of all parties to be changed by the views of others is a mark of growing trust.”

“Some paths have to be sought again and again, or new paths have to be found, because the spiritual experience of the community of the people of God is renewed again and again in the process, and many issues also have to be repeatedly struggled over together. Synodality is a permanent organisational and at the same time a spiritual process.”

10. Synodality as an educational process

The voices from the dioceses reveal a certain ambivalence towards synodal processes. Some people are so disappointed that they no longer expect anything to emerge from the new synodality. Others reject synodality, and want everything to stay the way it is. The vast majority however long for “a comprehensive culture of synodality, characterised by openness, empathy and authenticity and by a spirituality of taking the path together. They say that “the crucial point is the fundamental attitude of walking together on the path of faith.”

“In order to be able to grow as a Church towards an ever-greater synodal form, people need to be enriched with skills. Synodality is therefore to be kept in view in the sense of a *formatio continua*.” This requires that the Church be a learning community, incorporating intellectual, spiritual and emotional education, a theologically-sound and at the same time comprehensible communication of faith, and the willingness to become renewed as an individual and as a Church as a whole. Renewal thus includes taking a self-critical look at one’s own failures as a Church, for example in sexual and spiritual abuse, and an open climate in which mistakes and misconduct can be named and voiced. “Synodality is seen not only as a method, but as a lifestyle that must permeate all areas of the Church.”

“If they wish to restore trust in the Church, the bishops need to take up a clear position on the pressing issues of our time, such as equal access for all baptised people to church offices, a reassessment of sexual morality, and a non-discriminatory approach to homosexual and queer people. Taking up a clear position also means speaking a language that people can understand and that does not hide behind convoluted wording. As regards the abuse scandals, there needs to be an unambiguous acceptance of responsibility; power needs to be taken under control, and an attempt made to make amends to the victims of sexual and spiritual abuse. A synodal Church can only be successful if it is possible for all faithful to assume responsibility and partake in decisions at parish and diocesan levels.”