

German Catholic memo to

Australia's Plenary Council and the German 'Synodal Way' are two early experiments in the Catholic

Adam Wesselinoff

AFTER POPE Francis' general audience on 5 January, a delegation of German Catholics approached the Holy Father and pressed a document into his hands.

The delegation represented a movement called Neuer Anfang - "New Beginnings". The document was a nine-point manifesto proposing an alternative to the German "Synodal Way" causing shockwaves in the global Church because of its radical interpretation of the meaning of synodality.

Many Australian Catholics will have heard something about the Synodal Way, or about the President of the German Bishops Conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing.

Bishop Bätzing has called for far-reaching changes to church doctrine on everything from marriage, priestly celibacy, and women's ordination, and leads a push for a new, "horizontal" structure to the German Church.

Even though the Synodal Way is ostensibly non-canonical - unlike the Australian Plenary Council - the conclusions of its four forums and 230 participants are held by some, including Cardinal Reinhard Marx, to be binding on the German Church.

The Vatican has issued several statements critical of the process, as have other Europe-



German Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier speaks during the third Synodal Assembly in Frankfurt Feb. 4, 2021. PHOTO: CNS/JULIA STEINBRECHT, KNA

an Bishops' Conferences - recently, Poland and the Nordic countries.

Rumblings that the Germans are en route to schism or a repeat of the Reformation are getting louder.

Few, however, will have heard of Neuer Anfang. Yet Australian Catholics should

pay attention to this deeply convicted, theologically serious and tenacious opposition movement, given that Australia and Germany are, in many respects, the canaries in the mine regarding the global Church's "synodal" recalibration.

The Catholic Weekly spoke

with Birgit Kelle and Bernhard Meuser, two key figures in Neuer Anfang, about their manifesto - available in English at neueranfang.online/manifest - and their experiences during Germany's counterpart to our own Plenary Council.

In the view of Neuer An-

fang, the Synodal Way has resulted in two radically opposed visions of Christian life contesting the future of the German Church.

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al restructuring rather than spiritual renewal.

"With regard to the basic social form of the church, representatives of the Synodal Way busy themselves with the preservation of the status quo," says the Neuer Anfang manifesto.

"They wish to maintain and conserve the model of a highly institutionalised church that is 'serving its clientele' through adaptation and modernisation."

"What is not in view from the outset, though, is a church of genuinely shared spiritual life, in which people become a learning community of faith (and thus disciples)."

The Synodal Way's ethical discussions therefore revolve around a question of changing Church teaching, "from 'what was forbidden yesterday' to 'what is somewhat permitted now', so that what remains of

Driven to serve, St Ursula's sends aid to Lismore

Debbie Cramsie

THERE MAY be almost 800 kilometres between Kingsgrove and Lismore, but a Year 12 student is doing everything she can to bridge that gap by supporting the northern NSW community devastated by the recent floods.

Living the schools Ursuline charism of service to others, St Ursula's College student Mia Topen has initiated an urgent appeal to help those who have lost everything in the deluge, now declared a "national disaster" by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

A strong advocate of Catholic social teaching, the Year 12 student said she couldn't just sit back and watch the devastation unfold in the area without offering

some assistance. Currently more than 3000 homes remain affected by floodwaters and around 270 people are staying in evacuation centres, while thousands others are relying on family and friends, sleeping in spare bedrooms, caravans and garages.

Mia said she asked her school to get behind the struggling community in the midst of the biggest crisis the Northern Rivers area has seen, and they responded with the Lismore Flood Relief Appeal.

Donations of non-perishable food items, baby items, sanitary products and miscellaneous products including blankets, toilet paper, torches, batteries, radios and gumboots are now being collected by the school.

"The devastation is unbelievable with the long term

effects to be felt for many years to come," she said.

"Watching it unfold on social media, I felt so upset, sad and shocked and knew I had to do something to help.

"In the spirit of Lent and giving alms, I felt it was something of large importance, and believed that the student body would be very willing to donate to the people living in Lismore ... and they haven't disappointed.

"I guess my desire to help others is very much encouraged by my school's charism of service to the community."

Mia has aligned with Koori News, a not for profit and self-funded newspaper based in the heart of Lismore which provides aid to all members of the local community, both indigenous and non-indigenous. College principal Mary Leask said she is incredibly



Above: Year 12 students of St Ursula's College are collecting essential items to meet the needs of flood-affected people in Lismore. Right: Mia Topen is coordinating the response.

PHOTOS: GIOVANNI PORTELLI

proud of Mia and the entire school community for their practical Christianity in action.

"Serviam - I Will Serve is the motto at St Ursula's College Kingsgrove, and there could be no better way to live that out right now, as thousands are impacted by



horrendous flooding in NSW and QLD, than by pulling together to act in service of others through this appeal," she said. "Mia was the spark of inspiration that lit the fire of

action, and I am immensely proud of her."

If you would like to support the appeal, contact info@stursulakingsgrove.catholic.edu.au

Down Under: tread carefully

Church's pivot to synodality with more in common than you might think - just ask the Germans.

the Church can smoothly fit in with the cultural mainstream".

Meuser, corresponding by email with *The Catholic Weekly*, said the issue was a mistaken concept of autonomy: "One appeals above all to the autonomy of man and says: God has given him freedom so that he defines out of himself what he is and what he wants and how he lives."

He quotes Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck, a supporter of the Synodal Way and chairman of the Faith Commission of the German Bishops' Conference, who said: "How people have to live can no longer be generally authoritatively decreed without trampling on God's gift of autonomy."

What then, Meuser asks, is the role of the preacher - or indeed the sacraments, the teaching office of the Church, or of the Scriptures?

On this view, "it no longer gives ethical instructions and is only spiritual decoration" because nothing can intrude on the radical freedom of the individual.

"But can someone be a Christian who only listens to himself and no longer to Jesus?" Meuser asks.

The "conservative" vision of the Synodal Way also extends, in the view of Neuer Anfang, to its model of the synodal reform of Church structures.

The proposals, Meuser and Kelle say, are similar to those proposed to the Australian



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Birgit Kelle

Plenary Council, as reported in the last issue of *The Catholic Weekly* (06/03/2022): synodal bodies set up alongside priestly and episcopal authority, including Diocesan and national synods.

The major difference is that the German proposal would see lay Catholics participate in

decision-making at a binding, rather than consultative level - including in the ordination and appointment of Bishops.

Similar proposals were floated in Australia during the Plenary process, but have not made it through to the current stage.

Cardinal Walter Kasper,



Birgit Kelle, left, and Bernhard Meuser, above, are key figures in the Neuer Anfang 'New Beginnings' movement. PHOTO: CNS

known internationally as a German liberal Bishop, has been an unlikely opponent of these reforms, saying the Synodal Way has "not abandoned the episcopal office, but it has gutted it in its essence" by turning the Bishop into the chair of an advisory board.

"Thus the neck of the church founded on the Gospel and of the episcopate is broken," Cardinal Kasper said.

Neuer Anfang certainly does not deny that the Church in Germany is in deep trouble, as their manifesto says: "Indeed, there is abuse of power in the Church and there is too little appreciation and genuine participation by laypeople, especially women."

But Birgit Kelle told *The Catholic Weekly*, the solution is not the agenda of what she describes as "an event of church functionaries and selected individual laymen,

paid by meanwhile more than 5 million Euros of church tax money".

The Neuer Anfang manifesto is also forthright on the Synodal Way's proposals, which it says would result in "a bloated apparatus and permanently installed chatter".

"The church suffers from a lack of spirit and from too much of institution.

"No one needs a church in which vocations are replaced by appointments, devotion by contract, and trust by control.

"We want one simple, serving and praying church in the discipleship of Christ ... in empowerment of this sort, the church also finds the critical distinguishing criterion for its own inner life."

Kelle adds that, "The majority of Catholics in Germany are completely unaware of what is going on in these meetings - they are not even consulted about it."

She says the support for the Synodal Way's reforms among the German episcopate is also far from universal, and that enough bishops have reservations that a "blocking minority" could put a stop to the whole process - but "most are simply silent, some stay away from the Synodal Way or leave early at meetings".

"What would happen if even a handful of German bishops refused their further participation in this assembly and announced this on the

microphone? It would cause a salutary scandal."

Attempts to raise issues at the Synodal Way's discussion forums are also beset with difficulties.

"Even bishops, like any activist, get only one minute of speaking time in the debates. It is practically impossible to have reasonable or even theologically profound debates in this format," Kelle said.

"If we cannot stop this, a good result would also be that the discrepancy between the real problems of the Church in Germany and the staged problems would become more visible and it would maybe accelerate a new evangelisation on the long run," she added.

With the Plenary Council's Second Assembly rapidly approaching, and proposals to be voted on now under consideration by members, the Australian Church is making a major contribution to the growing understanding and practice of synodality.

Yet as Neuer Anfang's manifesto and desire for intentional discipleship shows, there are different possibilities for how synodality could be realised.

When asked whether she had any message for Australian Catholics, Kelle had only one short sentence to add.

"God bless you and please do not repeat all those mistakes we have already made in Germany."

Stop this Massacre

Pope Francis condemns 'unacceptable armed aggression' in Ukraine

■ Cindy Wooden

APPEALING AGAIN for an end to the war in Ukraine, Pope Francis said those who invoke God to promote or justify violence "profane his name."

"In the name of God, I ask: Stop this massacre," the pope said March 13 at the end of his Sunday Angelus address.

With thousands of people gathered under the bright sunshine of a Roman spring to pray the midday Marian prayer, Pope Francis turned their attention to Mariupol, Ukraine, a city named in honor of Mary; it has been besieged by Russian troops for two weeks.

The city, he said, "has become a martyred city of the heart-wrenching war that is destroying Ukraine."

"Before the barbarity of the killing of children, of innocents and unarmed civilians, there are no strategic reasons that hold up," the pope said. The only thing to do is "to stop the unacceptable armed aggression before it reduces the cities to cemeteries."



Sign in St Peter's Square calls for the consecration of Russia and Ukraine to Mary, on March 13, 2022. PHOTO: CNS/PAUL HARING



"With pain in my heart, I unite my voice to that of ordinary people who implore an end to the war."

Pope Francis

"With pain in my heart, I unite my voice to that of ordinary people who implore an end to the war," he said.

"In the name of God, listen to the cry of those who are suffering and stop the

bombings and attacks." Negotiations to end the war must begin seriously, he said, and the humanitarian corridors agreed upon to evacuate civilians and to bring basic necessities to people in

besieged towns must be respected and secure.

With the U.N. Refugee Agency reporting March 13 that almost 2.7 million refugees had fled Ukraine since Feb. 24, Pope Francis thanked all the individuals and agencies in the neighbouring countries who have welcomed them, and he encouraged continued generosity.

He also asked Catholic parishes and religious orders around the world "to increase moments of prayers for peace."

"God is the God only of peace, he is not the God of war," he said. "Those who support violence profane his name." Pope Francis led the people in the square, including several carrying Ukrainian flags, in a moment of silent prayer that God would "convert hearts to a firm desire for peace."

After the Angelus, the Vatican used the pope's English-language Twitter account to send, in 10 tweets, his entire appeal in Russian and Ukrainian. - CNS

Lent is a time to wake up, pray more, care for others

LENT IS a good time to ask God's help in throwing off any spiritual "drowsiness" that dulls a person's prayer life and attentiveness to the needs of others, Pope Francis said.

"It is a period in which God wants to awaken us from our inner lethargy, from this sleepiness that does not let the Spirit express itself," he said March 13 before leading the Angelus prayer with thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Square.

Looking at the Sunday Gospel reading, which recounted the transfiguration of Jesus, Pope Francis pointed out that the story says that Peter, James and John "had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his (Jesus') glory and the two men standing with him."

It wasn't the last time the disciples would snooze at an important moment, the pope said; it would happen in the Garden of Gethsemane.

"This somnolence in such important moments is surprising," he said. But it is possible that initially they, too,

were praying like Jesus was, "until tiredness prevailed."

Pope Francis asked people to reflect on whether they also are afflicted by an "ill-timed slumber," especially in the evening when they had tried or promised to pray.

Lent is the time to ask God for help in being wakeful in prayer, he said, because "keeping the heart awake does not depend on us alone: it is a grace and must be requested." The Gospel story, he said, speaks about Jesus' face changing appearance and his clothing being "dazzling white" just before the disciples wake up.

It is possible, he said, "that it was the light of Jesus that reawakened them. Like them, we too are in need of God's light, which makes us see things in a different way: it attracts us, it reawakens us, it reignites our desire and strength to pray, to look within ourselves and to dedicate time to others."

During Lent, the pope said, "ask the Holy Spirit to bring us out of this slumber that prevents us from praying." - CNS