

Freiburg Fundamental theologian analyzes the letter from 74 bishops

Striet: I don't take the letter about the Synodal Path too seriously.

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by Magnus Striet

Tübingen - 74 bishops and cardinals from America and Africa had expressed sharp criticism on the Synodal Path. The Freiburg fundamental theologian Magnus Striet regards the warnings of a schism to be out of place. The schism has already existed for a long time, he writes in a guest article.

Dated on April 11th 2022, a total of 74 cardinals and bishops have approached with a letter "An answer to the situation in Germany: A fraternal letter to our brother bishops in Germany". First of all, if that letter is an "answer", one wonders who actually asked the undersigned. Possibly nobody. Anyway, the Synodal Path, as it is going on in Germany, seems to cause a great deal of concern. Already before the Nordic and Polish bishop's conferences had raised plain concerns.

Consistently one hears about an threatening schism. The critics bluntly allude to the reform movement, that led to schism, when Luther practiced sharp criticism of the situation and theology in the church of his time. But the critics don't have to worry that a schism might come. **The schism has already been existing for a long time. Whether it is consummated institutionally is a secondary question.** In many catholic milieus, the inner distance to what is supposedly prescribed by the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church to be binding believed, is so definitive, that there nothing can be repaired. Whether this process has progressed in the German-speaking area only more intensively than in other cultural context, I cannot rate. **It is the taste of freedom, which since a long time as well many Catholics want to taste** as being appropriate to the Gospel, that has created the distance. The distance was created by the taste of freedom, which since a long time as well many Catholics want to taste as being appropriate to the Gospel.

Freedom, conscience and human nature

The undersigned dignitaries exactly have seen which way the wind is blowing in German Catholicism. Though, one may wonder, whether they have even once seriously considered the question of what has been negotiated under the term "autonomy" since century 18th. At any rate, doubts about this are reasonable. Freedom is not "autonomy," the letter to the German bishops says. "Authentic freedom" rather "as the Church teaches, is tethered to truth and ordered to goodness and, ultimately, beatitude".

One could agree, if they weren't talking about a authentic freedom. Obviously, there is also a non-authentic freedom, and the undersigned claim the exclusive right to decide about the truth, about what decides an authentic freedom from a non-authentic freedom. It is then said: "Conscience does not create truth". Aha, I would like to ask back, but: who would claim that in such a plainness? The next sentence is revealing: "A properly formed Christian conscience remains subject to the truth about human nature and the norms of righteous living revealed by God and taught by Christ's Church." The logic of this sentence is strikingly clear. For people who are not so well practiced in Catholic logic, as there are many in the Catholic space, it will briefly demonstrated. In doing so it should first be pointed out that human nature - Benedict XVI. in his speech to German Bundestag spoke explicitly of the

"ecology of man" - means not ecological questions, but questions of gender anthropology. Not by accident, the undersigned are also warning once again about so-called gender ideology.

Now to the logic of this sentence: 1. Homosexual sensing humans are to be treated with mercifulness, but: practiced homosexuality is a sin. The undersigned may rightly know themselves to be in accordance with the Catholic Catechism for Adults. In that way they can know that they are theologically in the sense of the magisterium legitimized, as even Pope Francis has warned against gender ideology. 2 In the face of this danger for humans being seduced by this ideology, a good formation of the Christian conscience is needed. 3. this formation is guaranteed by the Church of Christ. Therefore it must be organized hierarchical-episcopal. Finally, there is a constant threat, that the secular enters the Church.

Because - of course - the undersigned exactly know which are the "the norms of righteous living" rightly taught by the church, they also can state without compromise, that Synodal Path would undermine "the credibility of Church authority, including that of Pope Francis; **the** (!, note: Magnus Striet) Christian anthropology and sexual morality; and the reliability of Scripture". And - because a hint on the Holy Spirit may not be missing in such a kind of declarations - they note, that this one would not be heard on Synodal Path. That is the logic of this "response". Plain, but admittedly stunningly clear. Casually, it is also observed, that the "the Synodal Path process, at nearly every step" would be "the work of experts and committees" and that it would be "bureaucracy-heavy, obsessively critical, and inward-looking" and that the "joy of the Gospel" which would be "essential to Christian life" seemed "utterly absent from Synodal Path discussions and texts".

Even today, it is negotiated what is the core of the gospel

Humans, including me, are associative. As already Friedrich Nietzsche said: "His disciples would have to look more redeemed...". The undersigned of the "Response" not only warn, as already said, of "the confusion that the Synodal Path has already caused", but also of "schism in the life of the Church that will inevitably" threat. First of all it should be remarked that neither Synodal Path nor most of theologians who play a key role there are causing confusion. The question whether there is a right to self-determination corresponding to the Gospel has already been posed for a long time. **However, it is also not simply certain what the gospel is.** The undersigned of the "Answer" seem to know this. But with it they only make the oath of disclosure, that they do not know the highly complex history of Christianity, which is characterized by upheavals and transformations of the traditional faith, and which always only existed in plural, or that they only want to evade any discussion with a construction of a singular constructed by them.

Just as there is a plural of written Gospels, these and not others were compiled as a canon after a process of negotiation, it is negotiated even today what the core of the Gospel is. Right from the beginning there has been a dispute. And that is good, as long it is not carried out violently. In center of the inner-church disputes is the question, if it is allowed to practice even inside the church the rights of self-determination which in liberal democracies are legally secured. Those church-political disputes are anything but insignificant in view of the defensive state, in which those democracies factually are for some time. **If there should happen a schism on that question, then it is just like it is. Didn't also the clear Gods-practice by the Jew Jesus have schismatic tendencies, insofar as he relentlessly provoked the religious Establishment of his time. He went into death for his criticism of an excluding religiously founded moralism. He has known nothing about visions of a modern right of self-determination.** But from his practice, how he encountered humans, lines to Königsberg and Paris can be described. Historical processes are open. I am in favor of consistency.

Intellectually, I take the liberty of not taking the cardinals' and bishops' "response" too seriously. And definitely not from an ecclesiastical-sociological point of view. **If the undersigned really believe that in the future there will once again be "the" Roman Catholic Church, gathered under the pope**

and a doctrine of unity, they are likely to be thoroughly mistaken. Observed historically, this church has never existed anyway. And if the future Roman unity oath, should be taken by clergy and laity, that righteous Catholics have to be against the liberalization of gender relations, this homogenization measure will most certainly fail on an ecclesiastical-real-political level. If there is a constructional fault in Synodal Path, it is that its protagonists (if it's true) seriously believed, or still believe, that in a relatively short period of time they can bring in advance changes in the worldwide church. Thereby, recognizing the rights of LGBTQ-people is still the smaller problem. Even more difficult will probably be the question of the requirement for persons beyond those with the biological sex of a man, of admission to the (ordained) ministries, after past popes have even forbidden, to discuss the question.

The statements from the world episcopacy on German Synodal Path, which are now increasingly noticeable, signalize how diverse not only Catholicism but also the episcopacy itself has become. There is anything but Spirit-led unity. **And what pope Francis exactly wants, has never been revealed to me. His signals are anything but clear. Or maybe they are.** It should only be remembered that he once again expressly has prohibited blessing ceremonies for homosexual loving persons. If the German Synodal Path consistently passes resolutions, as it is showing so far, then there will be a crucial test. The chance that those will find general acceptance and will be adopted at the level of worldwide church within a reasonably foreseeable time is not big. Though it can already be observed that there is unrest also in the local churches spread over the globe, because the problems possibly are posed differently, but therefore still cannot be regulated with the Roman unity doctrine. The constant warning against protestantization of the church however signalizes, that since the 16th century, the Roman authorities have a pronounced fixation on developments north of the Alps. But what will happen in this country if the papers of Synodal Path are simply confiscated by Rome?

Apostolic succession can also be thought in a different way

It doesn't take much of a prophetic gift to predict that the conflicts will not end by this. **They will shift more and more to the diocesan levels.** If LGBTQ people do not feel welcomed, they will seek another accessible place that accepts their faith, or they will leave the Catholic Church altogether. Hierarchical authority has not been accepted for a long time. In addition, the priesthood has long been in a crisis that threatens its existence. And that is not only because, purely in terms of numbers, priests are becoming more and more invisible. Theological competence is expected, and: human persuasiveness. This may be described by theologians as theologically incorrect, or at any rate as not being Catholic. But this will neither interest dissenting theologians, nor a significant part of people who describe themselves as Catholics. If I am not mistaken, the vision of what constitutes the sacramentality of church is changing anyway. And that for good reasons. To reason the sacramentality of the Church via an unbroken apostolic succession, by the laying on of hands from man to man, is finally not only intellectually poor, but historically impossible to redeem. Apostolic succession can also be thought in another way. God's determination for man becomes visible when people live in trusting faith that God has revealed Himself as the Jew Jesus, that His human kindness has become person. The church then becomes a sacrament for the world when it promises this God in symbolic signs and through social and political practice and lets him become reality under the conditions of history.

When such a believed faith has a schismatic effect then it is like that. The danger for the Catholic Church is not that traditional thinking is abandoned. That God could want the salvation of all humans, after all for many centuries was not the prevailing theological. And also the Magisterium was decidedly discreet in face of such an optimism. Much more worrying is, that the processes could run completely disordered. Rules can and must be changed when they show themselves to be dysfunctional. But they can also suffocate life. And also the message of a God turned towards humans can suffocate because of a wrong fixation on tradition. Should the undersigned of the "answer" prevail in Rome, I am sure that in the Catholic Church in Germany people who already are permissive will become even more permissive. For the sake of the traditionability of this gospel.