

SECRETARIAT OF STATE

From the Vatican, on 16 January 2023 N. 2825/SdS/2023

Excellency,
Dear Bishop,

the letter of 21. December 2022, addressed by His Eminence the Archbishop of Cologne and the Most Reverend Bishops of Eichstätt, Augsburg, Passau and Regensburg to the undersigned, the Cardinal Secretary of State and the Prefects of the Dicasteries for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Bishops (copy), requires us to take up again the theme of the Synodal Path of the Church in Germany, which was already the subject of the interdicasterial meeting during the Ad Limina visit of the German episcopate on 18. November.

With regard to this meeting, we would like to begin by thanking the bishops once again for the great efforts they have made in investigating the heinous crime of sexual abuse of minors by men (including clergy) and women of the Catholic Church, as well as the often inadequate approach of some of the Church's pastors. In view- of the suffering suffered by the victims and the obligations of justice towards them, we encourage the continuation of the necessary work of purification and transparency along the lines indicated by the Holy Father Francis, in particular through the Apostolic Exhortation in the form of a "Motu proprio" of May 7, 2019 Vos estis lux mundi.

We now turn to you, Excellency, in your capacity as President of the German Bishops' Conference, because the questions raised by your confreres concern not only them, but all members of the same Conference. Therefore, we kindly ask you to bring this letter to the attention of all members of the Bishops' Conference by January 23.

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Attachment

To His Excellency
the Most Reverend Bishop Dr. Georg BÄTZING Bishop of Limburg
President of the German Bishops' Conference
Kaiserstr. 161
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This letter intends to answer the two questions raised by the above-mentioned Bishops in connection with the establishment of a "Synodal Council" decided by the Synodal Assembly on September 10, 2022. This Council, composed "according to the proportions of the Synodal Assembly," is envisioned as a "consultative and decision-making body on significant developments in the Church and society," which would "fundamental decisions of supra-diocesan significance."

In preparation, a "Synodal Committee" was appointed, consisting of the 27 diocesan bishops, 27 already appointed members of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), and another 20 members to be elected by the Synodal Path at its next synodal assembly. This "Synodal Committee" should begin its work in the course of this year.

In this context, the five undersigned archbishops and bishops ask, "Do I have to participate in the 'Synodal Committee'" because the Synodal Assembly has so decided? "May I participate?" when the Holy See has expressly stated that the Synodal Path "has no authority to oblige the bishops and the faithful to adopt new forms of governance and new orientations of doctrine and morals," which would be "a violation of ecclesial communion and a threat to the unity of the Church" (Declaration of July 21, 2022).

According to this statement - the content of which we confirm here - the bishops are not obliged to participate in the work of the "Synodal Committee", the main purpose of which is the preparation of the "Synodal Council" until 2026.

The non-binding nature of participation in the work of the "Synodal Committee" is already captured by the Statute of the Synodal Path, which states in Article 11, (5) that its "decisions" cannot limit the authority of the Bishops' Conference and are not binding on individual bishops.

The "Synodal Council" would then form a new governance structure of the Church in Germany, which - based on the action text published on the website www.synodaler.weg.de "Strengthening Synodality in the Long Term: A Synodal Council for the Catholic Church in Germany" - seems to place itself above the authority of the German Bishops' Conference and, in effect, to replace it.

Furthermore, a possible "Synodal Council of the Diocese", which is envisaged in the action text "Consult and Decide Together" and has already been adopted in the first reading - and thus could be finally adopted in the next synodal assembly or in the "Synodal Committee" - seems to be above the authority of the individual bishop and could put itself above the authority of the individual bishop within his diocese.

The most weighty doctrinal concern, which is already apparent on the way to the codification of these new legal institutes with which the Church in Germany wishes to endow herself, concerns the mission of the bishop, as set forth in n. 21 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*:

"Holy Synode teaches, however, that through episcopal ordination the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders is conferred. In the liturgical custom of the Church, as in the words of the holy Fathers, it is called the high priesthood, the totality of the sacred ministry. Episcopal ordination, together with the office of sanctification, also confers the offices of teaching and governance, which, however, by their nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college. In fact, on the basis of tradition, which is especially evident in the liturgical rites and in the practice of the Church of the East as well as of the West, it is clear that through the laying on of hands and the words of the \ consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is so conferred and the sacred imprint so conferred that the bishops eminently and visibly hold the office of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd, and priest, and act in his person."

This concern is based on the first of the main features envisaged for this planned "Synodal Council", namely, that its composition should be analogous to that of the existing Synodal Assembly.

Beyond the decision which the individual Bishops will take with regard to possible participation in the "Synodal Council", and in the spirit of the above considerations, we wish to make it clear that neither the Synodal Path, nor any body established by it, nor any Episcopal Conference has the competence to establish the "Synodal Council" at the national, diocesan or parish level.

The Holy Father has approved the present informa specifica and has ordered its transmission. We express the hope that the orientation given by Pope Francis in 2019 will be accepted as a guide for the Synodal Path and that it can be incorporated into the universal Synod on Synodality. The dicasteries of the Roman Curia, acting in the name of the Pope with vicarious power in the exercise of his primatial office (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, II, n. 5), always remain open to the continuation of a more extensive and deepening dialogue, which was begun at the aforementioned interdicasterial meeting. As agreed on that occasion, we are sending you with this letter the relevant protocol (annex).

Let us remain united in the fervent invocation of the Spirit of the Lord, so that He may help us to discern the paths that the Church must follow in order to implement that pastoral conversion which reminds us that "evangelization must be our guiding criterion par excellence" (Letter of Pope Francis to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany, n. 6).

In unity with all the bishops and in communion and obedience to the Successor of Peter, we commend ourselves to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as to the holy patron saints of the Church in Germany. Thus we remain with fraternal greetings to you and through you to all confreres in the episcopate, to priests and religious, and to the faithful laity.

Pietro Cardinal Parolin
Secretary of State

Luis Francisco Cardinal Ladaria Ferrer SJ
Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith

Marc Cardinal Ouellet
Prefect of the Dicastery for the *Bishopsekt of the Dicastery for the Bishops*