

The Catholic Church in Germany after the Synodal Path

Three scenarios

The Fifth Assembly of the Synodal Path, taking place on March 9th-11th, 2023, will lead to a historic challenge for the Catholic Church in Germany. After that, the Church will no longer be what it was before. Rome has articulated a clear requirement of unity with the universal Church during the ad limina visit of the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) in Rome in November 2022.

It is to be expected that Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin will concretize this obligation of the German bishops in his announced letter to Germany. Given the continuing disagreement of the central actors at the Synodal Path, there are increasing signs that Rome will send further (and more far-reaching) signals beforehand.

Three scenarios are imaginable – depending on the outcome of the Synodal Assembly in March:

Scenario 1: The reconciliation

- Rome acts resolutely before the Synodal Assembly.
- The Synodal Path averts the schism at the last second by re-submitting itself to the Church in a profession of faith.
- The bishops fulfill their biblical function and act as fearless shepherds; they accept the Roman guidelines ("No changes in structure, doctrine, and morals") and enforce them in their role as shepherds in the context of the Synodal Path.
- They commit themselves to dismantling what they have already implemented without coordination with Rome.
- Only those proposals that are compatible with Scripture and the continuous teaching of the Church will be presented in the global synodal process from the German side.

- Reconciliation will happen, and a change of focus from structural change to "pastoral conversion" and the new evangelization.

If Rome would set **such a powerful "synodal" sign before the Synodal Assembly**, all those of good will would be placed on a new path; all those who want to leave the horizontal and vertical unity of the Church would go their own way. Catholic Church in Germany would have the **chance for a new growing together towards the Lord of the Church.**

Options in Canon Law:

- Rome could demand a **profession of faith and an oath of fidelity** from all who are in shepherding and teaching responsibility to separate the sheep from the goats.
- Rome could appoint an **apostolic administrator** from outside with far-reaching powers.
- Rome could order a **general visitation** of the dioceses and their inter-diocesan institutions and works, and suspend all ongoing processes.
- Rome could resort to the "**Chilean solution**" – de facto depose all bishops and prevent them from exercising their office until Rome reinstates them.
- Rome could launch an externally moderated, **multi-year path of reconciliation** based on a common confession of all and working by all means on the "erosion of faith" (Pope Francis' letter to the Germans, July 2019) before the structural debate – through the renewal of catechesis and "pastoral conversion" of all.

Positive consequences:

- Comparable to the Council of Trent, a turning point could be gradually achieved. A **general deepening of faith could begin** so that things that are no longer lived would be reintroduced, and contents that are unknown or have become all too self-evident would be reconsidered and put into a contemporary language.
- It would require that pastoral workers practice **authentic catechesis** (= integration into the faith of the Church). Will they be able or want to? They would probably have to be trained to make up for what has been omitted in decades among the faithful. However, this scenario

could mean the **realization of the Second Vatican Council** in Germany, which would result in a completely different field of work for pastoral workers on-site or a shift in the focus of their work.

- At the diocesan level, the **shift in emphasis** would mean **reducing bureaucracy and the apparatus** – a radical streamlining of the Church toward its true mission.
- For the faithful, the gain would be to rediscover the **joy of the Gospel** and come to a deepened **sacramental life**. One might hope that **religious vocations** would increase. Possibly it would also lead to more **healed families** (because where there is the conversion of the individual, the environment changes).
- Only in this scenario would the **principle of synodality**, according to Pope Francis, have a chance to gain a foothold in the German-speaking world. And only within the context of this renewal from the sources of faith could one honestly speak of a "sensus fidei fidelium" and of a listening Church.

Obstacles of this scenario:

- The bishops, however, would have to **defend** the radical change, facing **outraged laity and the apparatus of secular and secularized church media**, which they seem to lack the strength to do.
- The structurally and numerically dominant part of lay people employed by the Church would **likely rebel**.
- The Central Committee of Catholics (ZdK) would perceive the reconciliation as a **defeat in the struggle for procedural power**; they would speak of an anti-democratic re-hierarchization. The committee would fear being deprived of funds and the already implausible legitimacy of speaking for "the laity."
- There would be a **massive hemorrhage of "structural Catholics"** who want specific external reforms and an unoffensive church that is reduced to a service provider.
- The Catholic Church, by its re-submission to Rome, would **lose its social status**; it would likely lose its support from the state, its economic base, its faculties, and many of its privileges; it would be poorer, more powerless, more unprotected, and, in extreme cases, would become a persecuted religious minority.

- The option would be **in accordance with the Gospel, it would save the unity with the universal church, but not the majority.**

PROGNOSIS:

As things stand today, Scenario 1 is the least likely option;

It seems illusory, given the hardening between the fronts, as it would require a turning through 180 degrees among the officials of the Synodal Path.

Moreover, Rome would have to demand this turnaround decisively.

Scenario 2: The dirty schism

- **Rome acts and reacts in a diffuse and stalling manner.**
- **The majority of the bishops continue to refuse the Roman guidelines; they insist on a German special path in structure, doctrine, and morals.**
- **The majority of bishops refuse to make corrections to structural changes already made in their dioceses.**
- **The majority ignores the binding doctrine on matters of the constitution of the Church and Christian anthropology.**
- **It would be made impossible for preachers, lay people in church service, clerics, and religious to act in congregations and preach in line with universal catholic teaching, Scripture and tradition – by the procedural power of the Synodal Path, the normative power of its decisions, the new Church labor law and by public media protest and pressure.**
- **The Synodal Path uses the global synod to promote its positions to the universal Church.**
- **The process of internal schism within German Catholics escalates; personal parishes, sectarian conventicles, and esoteric community formations occur.**
- **More and more people turn away from God.**

This scenario defines the division of the Catholic Church in Germany, which is already real in its essential features.

Negative consequences for Catholics in Germany:

- In fact, there would be **two Magisteria**: the Roman Catholic one, which is forced into a niche existence in Germany, and the very present "differently Catholic" (Bätzing) Magisterium of the "Synodal Path", which is pushed by secular and church media.
- There **would no longer be** a binding **joint teaching of the Church** – there would only be opinions about religious subjects. Church discipline could no longer be implemented (as is already the case in some places).
- The Church would **no longer be a home**. It would no longer provide any security; it would be structurally unpeaceful. It would be the end of the "pax christiana" in Germany.

- Families would become even more **deeply divided**, communities would **fall into parties**, and theological faculties (universities) would become training camps of enemies. There would be a pious "civil war" with unequal power distribution, an unmistakable series of interpersonal disputes, and direct confrontations. Many existing bonds and friendships would not survive this.
- People would **turn away from certain bishops but toward others**. They would avoid certain priests and seek out those they consider "right".
- The **church tax would come under pressure from two sides**: Liberals would refuse the money because they are authoritatively denied the "reforms" they demand. Roman-oriented Catholics would refuse to contribute economically because of the schismatic disobedience of the bishops.
- Given the lack of clarity on the schism, **faithful Catholics** would refer to Scripture/catechism/Rome and **withdraw from** their concrete Church environment (parish, diocese).

Loyalty to Catholic doctrine would demand a high, even existential, price. Church ministry would no longer be an option for faithful Catholics. Vocations to the priesthood would no longer have a place in the church.

- No ecclesiastical institution could **serve two masters**. Quite a few facilities would go under. Previous employees will have to leave their jobs and places of residence.
- **Evangelization** would be **impossible**, given continuing rejections.
- Lay Catholics who are not employed by the church or in leadership positions of Catholic communities, would increasingly leave the legal entity of the Catholic Church in Germany, lose their trust in it, and form a kind of "**underground Church**."
- **Sacraments, catechesis, and spiritual life** would have to be sought through unofficial channels and personal relationships.
- **Priests and bishops** who want to remain faithful to the universal Church, as well as members of religious orders whose leadership chooses the schismatic path, would find themselves in an **existential trap** unless Rome offers them a place to go and will not leave them

alone with their decision to remain Catholic. They would have no option to leave the schismatic German structure without facing existential threats. A few would make courageous decisions in this process, but the majority would see themselves forced to stay.

- **Criticism of the official German line** would be sanctioned – possibly even with the church actively involving governmental anti-discrimination agencies against those holding on to catholic teaching. Media pressure, informer systems, and purges would ensure that only those loyal to the line would get and stay in positions of responsibility.
- In Rome, the **marginalized "old faithful"** who align themselves with the second Vatican Council would find isolated allies but not an official point of contact.
- The already small remnant of faithful Catholics would be dramatically reduced once again since a part of the faithful would **remain in their parishes out of structural compulsion**, thus depriving themselves of the possibility of living in an integral form of the Catholic faith at all.
- The Catholic Church in Germany would follow precisely **the path of the Dutch** in the 1970s, which led to the nationwide demolition of church life. It would institutionalize the failed church concept of Protestant regional churches – the **contourless NGO of the "good."**
- The Church would become “shapeless”; **no one could say what it is anymore**. The relevance of the institution would sink into the bottomless depths.

Negative consequences for Rome and the universal Church:

- The disease in the German part of the Body of Christ would spread like an abscess along anatomical clefts to the Church until the abscess becomes a **systemic disease of the universal Church**.
- Rome (and the "ministry of unity") would **continue to lose authority** because the alienation from the universal Church (the culmination of which is now the Synodal Path), which is dragging on for decades, is not adequately responded to.
- Dioceses could **implant** evident heresies under the Catholic guise into the **farthest corners of their structure**. It would be the invitation to teach the wrong thing, to train in the wrong thing, and to spread the

wrong thing bluntly and with media attention. After all, there are no consequences to fear.

The option also has a few positive dimensions:

- It would mean abandoning the "church as a service provider" and promoting to the **individual believer to become a subject inside the Church**, who would be stripped of the crutches of conventional faith. To be Catholic would mean: to be Catholic by choice, to set out on the path of "missionary discipleship" (Evangelii Gaudium). It could lead to the paradoxical insight: **I have to leave the Church (i.e., the public corporation) to stay in the Church.**
- **Strong, small communities and groups** would **emerge**, but they would have to lead an underground existence for decades. These cells would be the hope of the Church in Germany. They desperately would need strong, good pastors of souls. They could develop a missionary dynamic and certainly be attractive to those seeking spirituality.
- The self-destructive process would also drive forward **the networking of like-minded people** and lead from the ruins into a new intensity of the Church.

PROGNOSIS:

Scenario 2 is the worst possible option and, at the same time, the most likely one should Rome not clearly intervene. Therefore, this scenario must, under all circumstances, be prevented.

Scenario 3: The formally established schism

- **Rome demands unity with the universal church in "structure, teaching, and morals" according to the terms of the ad limina visit. This unity would be demanded from the bishops, not from the "Synodal Path", which has no status in canon law whatsoever.**

- **The majority of the bishops refuse to follow the Roman guidelines; they insist on a special German path and represent this position offensively to Rome.**
- **Rome responds in accordance with Canon Law and the Concordat by taking clear and unambiguous measures.**
- **A complicated exploratory process begins at all levels (from the bishop to the last faithful). Leading Question: Cum Petro et sub Petro – yes or no?**
- **Rome formally declares the schism.**

Scenario 3 – the schism of a particular church from the Church as a whole, formally established by Rome – is a radical measure that may be resorted to only in extreme emergencies. Such a case exists when the inner decay of a local church can no longer be stopped in any other way than by a clarifying cut by which it is determined who still belongs to the Catholic Church and who has left it in doctrine and practice.

The negative consequences are drastic:

- The **schism established by Rome leads to a separation** of the sound doctrine part of the local church, associated with Rome, from the "schismatics", who basically are a separate group, no longer Catholic and free to reorganize.
- There are several levels at which **the schism, declared by Canon Law (and with consequences at the concordat level)**, could take place. In any case, the primary concern is with the bishops rather than with those actually responsible.
- **Forced resignation of the entire German episcopate.** Rome removes the schismatic bishops (or deposes all bishops) and then reinstates certain bishops of sound doctrine or installs new bishops associated with Rome. Rome excommunicates the schismatic bishops unless they submit in obedience. With the removal, their pastoral office expires. All faithful who follow them anyway follow them into excommunication.
- Diocese by diocese must decide where to go - **with Rome or against Rome?** Because at this level, instead of participating in the Roman decision, there can also be rebellion (likewise with parishes and associations).

At the **level of the dioceses**, which do not go along with the decision but rebel, "ecclesiastical structures" – depending on their loyalty – then stand against each other; a kind of "rivalry" could arise, which is

evaluated differently depending on the ecclesiastical or state point of view. What schismatic dissenters are from the Church's point of view could be seen from the state's point of view as an ecclesiastical emancipation movement valuable for society as a whole.

- There is the "**individual level**" (of **individual faithful and individual parishes**): Altar stands against altar. Parishes decide which "church" they want to belong to. At the **level of individual parishes, things become even more complex and confusing** for the individual believer, who is likely to be overwhelmed by the question of the catholicity of his parish. The individual must make a decision one way or the other. Many will not have a choice (as in the diaspora or rural areas with only one parish).
- The schism leads out of the grey area of the indefinite. **With dramatic losses of human and content-related substance**, the **confession** emerges **as the core of church identity**. Here, an extraordinarily painful aspect is inseparable from a positive aspect: From every single bishop, every pastoral worker, every teacher of the faith, and indeed from all the faithful, confession is demanded.
- The **division would be complete**. Faithful Catholics would have a sense of "coming home to Rome"; some would form themselves extra-Catholic, "differently Catholic", or as a national church; many would "leave" – away from any form of Christian commitment.
- Since the unity of the Church was recently **held together** in many cases only **by money**, the schism would trigger complicated processes about "who owns what". Which of the two entities would retain or gain new public corporation status? **According to the Concordat, this status would belong to the Catholic Church, which is associated with Rome**. However, the situation could lead to the German state's termination of the Concordat and a legal reorganization. In the end, the dissenters could find themselves in the well-feathered nest of the **Old Catholic movement** – made under state-church law. They could take what they need to maintain the structure in terms of material goods, church buildings, and from the fund for the compensation of clerics and church employees.

In any case, a formal schism by the **cleanly drawn cut** leads to an internal purification of the Church, to a rejection of the model of the People's Church (*Volkskirche*), and to a sharpening of the ecclesiastical profile of both parties, which now break down into visible options for which one has to decide.

Positive consequences of the scenario:

- The **Roman Catholic Church** would have the chance to rethink its structures and priorities. It could make the sacramental constitution of the Church, its biblical heritage, and its missionary dynamics shine again.
- Those who have belonged to **the Catholic Church only by name** for decades, even working for it, but who have long since ceased to identify with its teachings, who are, in fact, not Catholic, would have the opportunity to **give up living a lie** and bring the external conditions into line with their internal condition.
- At the price of a long-abandoned unity, there could be **competition for the minds and hearts of the people**. The "proof of the spirit and of power" (Lessing) would make the historic judgment.
- The most straightforward situation arises at the "**Chilean level**" of **the bishops**. The priests, pastoral workers, and the faithful suffer the least if the decision is also carried out at the lower levels. Bishops will be replaced. Structures remain in place. Those who no longer wish to remain Catholic leave.
- The schism could (depending on the manner and speed of ecclesiastical reorganization) amount to a **devaluation of the territorially oriented parish principle**. **Spiritual centers**, which no longer function according to the principle of territoriality but according to Catholic confession, would partially replace parishes. The spiritual life would take more effort, but it would be possible.
- A factually existing separation is not based on conjecture, rumor, suspicion, or subjective assumptions; it is **publicly, church-officially and therefore bindingly established**.
- The formally established schism gives **legal security to all involved**; it ends the war of opinions and hostility among the faithful. Disputed points have been clarified, and a constructive action perspective exists.
- It is possible that a schism will provoke the **renaissance of hospitality and house churches**, where those faithful who wish to remain Catholic gather and win priests for their community through networks to continue receiving the sacraments.

- The **networking of the faithful will become crucial** in a situation where the local community is no longer possible, and the Internet becomes the place where the faithful gather. However, this could be a disadvantage for those who do not have Internet access, especially the elderly. They will become isolated and have difficulty adjusting to the new situation. A "liquidation" of the pastoral ministry, which must become more fluid, mobile, and present, would be the order of the day.
- By rejecting far-reaching ecclesiological and anthropological changes in doctrine and practice in the Catholic Church in Germany as heretical and inadmissible, Rome **serves the universal Church**; corruption cannot have a systemic effect and poison the entire body of the Church.

PROGNOSIS:
**Scenario 3 – the formally established schism –
would be the worst thing in terms of unity;
in terms of clarity, the most distinct scenario
to clarify the situation of the German particular church.**

Conclusion:

Church unity is **communion in truth and love**. It obliges us to struggle for this unity. Nevertheless, there is a point where an external unity held at any cost destroys true unity. Although in a Church that takes Eph 5 and Jn 17:21 seriously, there exists an **indissolubility of the unity of the Church** that is of the same unconditionality as the indissolubility of marriage, the **ultima ratio of a clean separation of the incompatible** can be the means of choice to save the Church from its final disfigurement and to **preserve the real unity in truth and love**.

Scenario 1 remains the most desirable solution that is at the same time hardly imaginable in human terms; Scenario 2 would be the worst solution for all parties involved, and scenario 3 the most bitter, but in any case most straightforward solution in terms of content.