



THE GERMAN SYNODAL CONFERENCE

A concrete example of synodality

Dr. Martin Schockenhoff, We are Church International, 5 February, 2026

Introduction

What does „Synod“ mean? (1)



„Then the apostles and the elders, together with the whole congregation, decided...”

Acts 15, 22

Introduction

What does „Synod“ mean? (2)

Protestant churches:

Joint decision making by bishops and lay people



Catholic church:

Decisions are made by the bishops only,
lay people are excluded

The Backstory (1)

1971 – 1975: Würzburg Synod

- Implementation of Vatican II
- 212 voting lay people out of 320 members (2/3 majority of lay people over bishops and clerics)



The Backstory (2)

1971 – 1975 Würzburg Synod

Decisions implemented in some or many dioceses:

- Participation of lay people in parishes and dioceses
- Modern religious education
- Promotion of ecumenism



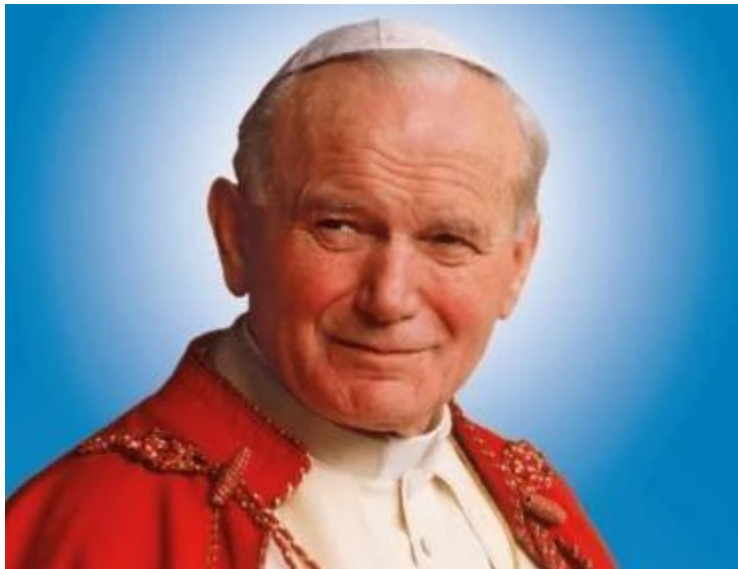
Decisions not implemented:

- Womens' diaconate (no response from Rome)
- Sermon by lay people (restricted by Rome but actually practiced in some dioceses)
- Request for review of mandatory celibacy (no response from Rome)

The Backstory (3)

1978 – 2013

The spirit of Vatican II partially gets lost



2015

Pope Francis postulates
„healthful decentralization”



The Backstory (4)

27 September 2018:

Publication of the MHG Report on the sexual abuse of minors by priests and members of religious orders:

- The sexual abuse has systemic causes within the church
- These causes are structures of power, mandatory celibacy and antiquated sexual teaching

March 2019:

The Bishops Conference invites the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) to the Synodal Path

May 2019:

The ZdK agrees, provided that womens ordination is also on the agenda

29 June 2019:

Ambivalent letter of pope Francis to the German bishops



The Backstory (5)

1 December 2019:

The Synodal Path starts

Fierce criticism from conservative opponents, but predominantly approval



The Backstory (6)

2019 – 2023: Resolutions of the Synodal Path



1

Participation of lay people in the election of bishops

2

Blessing of homosexual and re-married couples

3

Ordination of women

4

Sermon by lay people

All resolutions of the Synodal Path are not binding on the bishops.

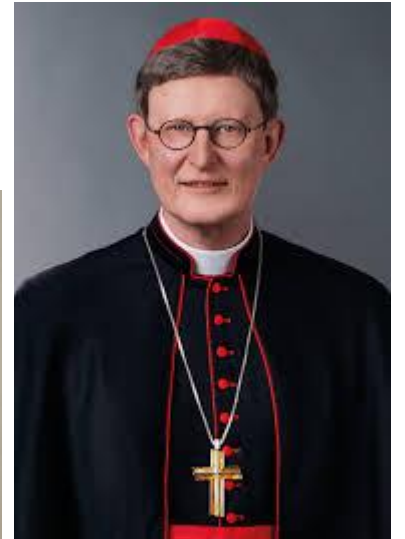
Recurring criticism from Rome and from conservative bishops

The Backstory (7)

September 2022:

Resolution, to transform the Synodal Path into a permanent body (“Synodal Council”)

- Tasks: Debating and decision-making on substantial issues of church life in Germany
- Criticism from Rome and opt-out of four conservative bishops



The Backstory (8)

November 2025:

After coordination with Rome, the tasks and the name are changed:

- The name shall be „Synodal Conference“
- The task “decision making on substantial issues of church life in Germany” is replaced by “adopting resolutions on substantial issues of church life in Germany”



The Setup of the Synodal Conference (1)



Number of
delegates:

81

27

selected by the Bishops'
Conference

+

27

selected by the ZdK

+

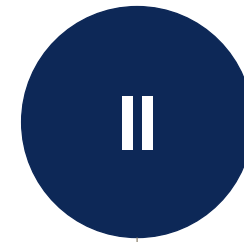
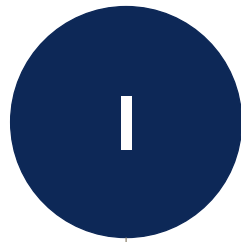
27

jointly selected by the
Bishops' Conference and ZdK

All delegates will have equal voting rights

Final decisions need a 2/3 majority

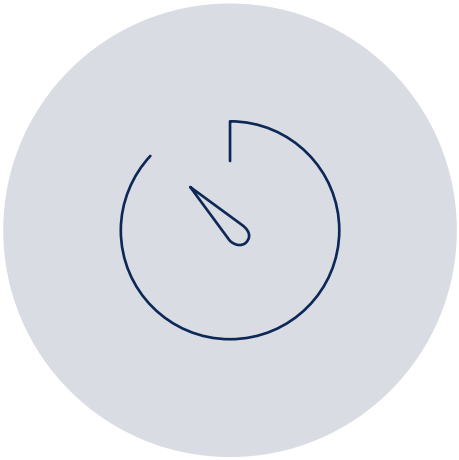
The Setup of the Synodal Conference (2)



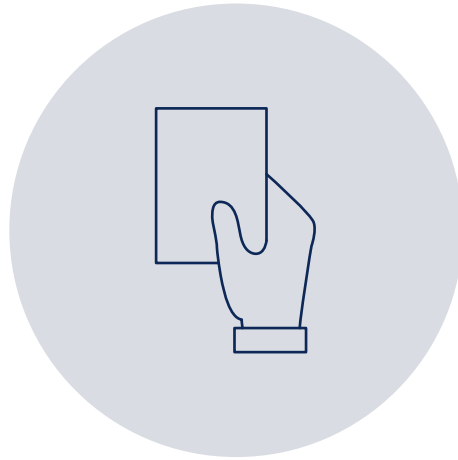
At the request of one third of each group or of the female and non-binary members present, the final vote has to be postponed, and the respective matter has to be discussed further.

In this case, the matter shall be revised and re-submitted to the synodal conference in the revised version. The request to postpone the final vote may only be made once.

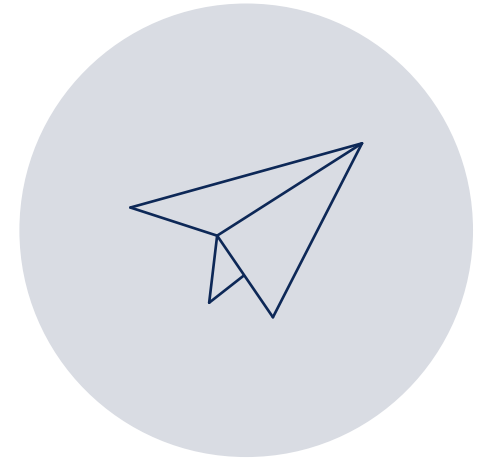
The Setup of the Synodal Conference (3)



9 bishops can request a postponement of the final vote, but they can not veto the final vote on the revised version



As final decisions (only) need a 2/3 majority, the 27 bishops theoretically could be outvoted by the other delegates



However, the intention of the postpone meet option is to facilitate consensus decisions.

The Setup of the Synodal Conference (4)



Still outstanding, but to be expected is the approval from the Bishops' Conference and from the Vatican

Resolutions of the Synodal Conference will not be binding on the bishops. Each bishop will be responsible for implementing or not these resolutions in his respective diocese

Tasks and competencies

Comments on developments in society and church in Germany as part of the worldwide church

Debates and adopts resolutions on important issues of church life in Germany

Promotes the church in the service of evangelization

Adopts resolutions on strategic questions of budgeting and other financial issues of the catholic church in Germany

Reports regularly on its work

Uses and tests forms of participation of church members

Deals with topics that are assigned to it by the Bishops' Conference or the ZdK

Can on its own take up and decide on issues within the scope of its competence

What can we expect and hope for?



1 Has there been any progress compared to Vatican II and the Würzburg Synod?

2 Compromise with the Vatican

3 Procedural: patronizing synodality: we listen to you, we decide without you
→ Decision making power remains within bishops only

4 In substance: Only minor progress since Vatican II

5 Institutionalized body in Germany with equal participation of lay people

6 An opportunity for synodality, however depending on the ongoing goodwill of the bishops as well as the other delegates

Can the Synodal Conference be a Template for other Countries?

The canon law is the same

A synodal body on national level requires an adequate and representative counterpart on the side of lay people

Long-standing tradition of cooperation between bishops and lay peoples' organizations in Germany

Synods on diocesan level?



A Democratic Model on Parish Level



Pursuant to the statutes for parish councils in the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, all matters are decided by majority vote

The priest can be outvoted by the lay members

Only on questions of liturgy and martyria, the priest has a right of veto (no right to overrule the majority!)

Even though it is disputed whether this is compatible with the CIC, the diocese sticks to this model

If nothing happens ...

... we should just do it
ourselves !

GAZIN FÜR
MENSCHENRECHTE
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JANUAR – MÄRZ

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Comments ?

Questions ?