

Statement by Archbishop Franz Lackner

In May last year, Pope Francis surprised many by announcing the theme for another Synod of Bishops in 2023: "For a Synodal Church.

Community - Participation - Mission" is the full title. Even with the benefit of hindsight, I consider this choice of theme by the Holy Father to be a brilliant idea inspired by the Holy Spirit. Precisely at a time when much is in motion within the Church, there is now a Synod on synodality itself, because synodality is the essence of the Church.

From the beginning, the Pope repeatedly emphasises that this should be a spiritual process of listening and discernment. This is also the purpose of the synodal prayer, a prayer that was regularly recited at the meetings of the Second Vatican Council. As part of the opening of the synodal process, a study day was held in Rome, where the method of the so-called Listening Circle - originally from the Jesuit-Ognatian tradition - was practised and recommended. It is based on the first synod, the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, which is reported in the Acts of the Apostles. The discussion there leads to a listening to what there is to report in terms of authentic faith experience, but at the same time also to a listening to the contribution of the competent authorities. At the end there is the decisive sentence for synodal processes: "The Holy Spirit and we have decided". (Acts 15:28).

In order to support honest discussion, attentive listening and spiritual silence, Pope Francis has given this process a questionnaire. Since October of last year, this questionnaire has also been used in our country in dioceses, parishes, religious orders, universities and various lay organisations. In many dioceses, so-called "pre-synodal meetings" took place. We bishops met with guests for a study day in Salzburg and invited to such a pre-synodal assembly during the summer plenary meeting of the Bishops' Conference in Mariazell. Together with representatives of various confessions, religious, delegations of lay associations, Christians from the most diverse areas of society and public life, full-time and voluntary, the experiences and insights of this process were reflected on there in a two-day synodal event.

The deliberations in Mariazell have once again made it clear: As Church we have a double responsibility. On the one hand, for the Kingdom of God here locally, as it lives, suffers and is shaped by longings. On the other hand, we also have the responsibility to remain receptive, capable of docking, capable of complementing with a view to the universal Church. Doing justice to both is the great challenge. In concrete terms, this means not falling into the danger of 100% answers. The Pope has urgently warned against this several times. I may quote: "I am allergic to thoughts that are already complete and finished." And: "There is nothing more dangerous for synodality than to think that we have already understood everything, that we already control everything."

The results of the synodal process in Austria are summarised in a report which is now available. It was written by a four-member editorial team and also includes the feedback from the pre-synodal assembly in Mariazell. We bishops did not intervene in the corpus of this synthesis and the feedback. Our contribution is merely an accompanying letter which has also been sent to you.

As we hold the Austria Report in our hands today, we are aware that we have heard many voices, but not representatively all of them. Despite intensive work, honest efforts, some groups were almost not heard at all. We see this not only as a shortcoming, but as a task to continue the synodal process and to establish synodal understanding in general as a way of working in the Church in Austria.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone for their contribution. To those who have taken on special tasks – especially the synod and editorial teams at diocesan and national levels – my special thanks.

After the national phase, the process will now continue on a continental level. The Roman General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops is drawing up a working document from all the submissions, which will be discussed at seven continental meetings. They will be attended not only by bishops but also by three lay women and men per nation. The continental assembly for Europe will take place in Prague in February next year. We can look forward to seeing where the Spirit of God will lead us through this common journey on all continents!

Statement by PD Dr Petra Steinmair-Pösel

"A church that holds synods is not yet a synodal church. We can call ourselves one when the everyday life of the church at all levels [...] is characterised by a synodal style."

This statement from one of the responses received sums up a central insight of the Synodal Process in the Austrian Church: the pending task of a cultural change towards a synodal culture that shapes and permeates the life of the ecclesial community at all levels. How this is concretely understood by those involved in the Synodal Process is briefly summarised in the following 9 theses:

1. The Synodal Process that has been started should definitely be continued. Even if there was initial reticence and scepticism on the part of some of those involved, most of the feedback agrees that the Synodal Process is a forward-looking and spiritually based search movement that should definitely be continued.

This is especially true in view of the loss of importance of the Catholic Church perceived in many places in a religiously and ideologically plural society characterised by secularisation tendencies and in view of the numerous questions that are currently being asked with regard to the future of the Catholic Church.

2. Synodality is not an end in itself. The syntheses also largely agree that synodality is not an end in itself, but should serve to enable the church to live out its mission in the best possible way in the spirit of Jesus. At the centre of this "Mission" stands for Jesus Christ, looking towards him and from him towards fellow human beings. Church guidelines and structures should therefore be examined and further developed with regard to this mission, so that they support the church in actively reaching out to people, making God's love and mercy tangible to all and living a clear option for the poor and disadvantaged.

3. The Church's commitment in the charitable and socio-political field is essential and indispensable. The Church's commitment in the area of Caritas is highly valued; this includes issues such as combating poverty, commitment to refugees, accompaniment of old, sick, needy people, commitment to the homeless, commitment to global solidarity, justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This social dimension in the commitment of the church and the faithful should be further strengthened; it contributes to the credibility of the church externally and internally.

4. Community is experienced first and foremost in the parishes - these communities need to be shaped accordingly. Many experience home, support and meaning in the parish. The Eucharist is valued by the faithful as a source of strength and a relationship with God, but also as the foundation of community. There is a desire for attractive church services and a contemporary language. There is also a great longing for spiritual offerings, and basically for more mysticism and contemplation, i.e. the deep dimension of faith.

5. Synodality thrives on participation - this is to be promoted in all areas and at all levels. Several syntheses addressed the fact that this participation encounters obstacles:

- Some observe closed communities to which socially disadvantaged people, migrants, families, children and young people, remarried divorcees and members of the LGBTQIA+ community do not find access, or vice versa, that it is difficult for members of the church to find access to these groups.
- Participation should also be promoted in the sense of greater commitment and transparency with regard to advisory bodies such as parish councils, pastoral councils, etc.

- The participation of women is also almost universally discussed: They are responsible for the church's honorary office, but often do not feel that they are heard and valued accordingly. It is remarkable that the faithful make a distinction here between ordination and the exercise of leadership functions: Many statements speak in favour of the targeted promotion of women in church leadership functions in the sense of more gender justice, but this does not automatically support the demand for the ordination of women, even if many can imagine or wish for this at least in the form of the diaconate.

6. Concerns from the synodal consultation that can be taken up and implemented locally should be implemented immediately. According to the syntheses, these include topics such as

- the already mentioned gender justice, which could be strengthened e.g. through the targeted promotion of women in church leadership positions and governing bodies (for example through a women's quota).
- The expansion of participation opportunities in the direction of transparency of decision-making processes and co-determination at all levels (more binding nature with regard to consultation by parish councils, participation in appointments to offices, etc.).
- the increased participation of lay people in the liturgy, e.g. through permission for pastoral assistants to preach and baptise and for hospital chaplains to administer the anointing of the sick.
- striving for a more understandable language in liturgy and proclamation as well as a pastoral approach to people who are excluded from church life in various ways.
- a continued transparent processing of abuse.
- the promotion of faith formation (offers in the area of spirituality and contemplation etc.).

7. For concerns that cannot be implemented locally, the faithful want them to be addressed at the appropriate church level. According to the syntheses, these include topics such as

- women's access to ordination and related ministries,
- celibacy as a condition of admission to the ordained ministry,
- the adaptation of doctrines in consideration of the progressive revelation of the Holy Spirit (e.g. a rethinking of some church positions in the area of sexual morality, medical ethics, etc.).

8. The understanding and practice of synodality must be further developed and deepened. This includes practising "spiritual conversation": here it is a matter of consciously adopting an attitude of intensive and active listening to the Holy Spirit and the other participants in phases of silence. The background is the conviction that every human being, without exception, is a "little word of God" through which God works in this world. Out of this spiritual attitude, people listen and speak in the following "listening circles".

9. Synodal communication and a synodal culture of dialogue, discussion and conflict based on it could also be a forward-looking contribution of the church for a fragmented society. The consciously practised "listening" in the form of spiritual conversation with its sequencing of phases of dialogue with phases of silence proves to be a "sustainable discovery of the process". Practising this attitude promises positive developments, especially when mutual listening is followed by the necessary discernment, decisions and concrete actions.

Statement by Prof. Dr. Regina Polak

1. Synodal process in the spirit of Pope Francis

In the Synodal process, the people of God are to listen to the Spirit and the Word of God, to the signs of the times, to the marginalised and to each other. In particular, the bishops are to listen to the people of God. The Synodal Process is therefore a methodically ordered listening to identify together, in a spiritual process, the mission of the Church in the 21st century. In this way, cognition, participation and co-responsibility are to be strengthened, bridges are to be built and learning from each other, and hope is to grow: "On this common journey we are called to adopt a new attitude and to renew our ecclesial structures in order to respond to God's call for the Church under the signs of the times. Listening to the whole people of God will help the Church to make the pastoral decisions that best correspond to God's will." (cf. Vademecum for the Synod, p. 8)

In comparison with this specification, exemplary observations on the synodal process in Austria from a pastoral-theological perspective now follow:

2. Diocesan differences in methodology, participation and intensity

The synodal process was interpreted and implemented very heterogeneously in Austria. The methods ranged from top-down surveys by the ordinariate and scientifically

The process was accompanied by surveys, "listening circles" and democratically agreed draft programmes to strengthen synodal structures. In the majority of dioceses, the faithful participated very actively and the process met with a positive response, especially within the inner space of those already committed. However, as a result of disappointing previous experiences with similar processes (Dialogue for Austria, Future Forum3000), there was also reticence, scepticism and mistrust in the core segment. Individual groups - including conservative groups and movements - distanced themselves from the process. Complaints about non-transparent processes and too little participation were heard from individual dioceses.

Difficulties were also encountered in the participation of young people, other-language communities as well as external interlocutors, such as other- and non-religious people, so-called "far from the church", social fringe groups and secular experts. In general, there was a great need for discussion, especially in the "inner circle", across the different groupings and also with the bishops on issues of faith and religion.

Structural issues. In addition to many new and positive experiences with the synodal methodology, fears, mistrust, anger and latent conflicts could also be observed.

3. Contents

Themes dominated which have been of concern to the Catholic Church in Austria for decades and on which there are comprehensive position papers: above all women (incl. deaconess, priesthood), participation of the laity, transparent bishop appointments, clerical leadership style, youth, sexual ethics. New topics were in particular the repeatedly observed and lamented loss of relevance in society as well as the question of how the Church deals with same-sex couples or diverse sexual identities. It is above all the inner-church issues that burn on the soul of a majority of the faithful involved - especially the highly committed. Although there is no complete unity in this regard, the surprisingly homogeneous national syntheses clearly show that the participants expect reforms in this regard.

At the same time, the problems within the Church and the reform backlog in this regard seem to prevent the Church in Austria from dealing intensively with its mission in the staggering world of the 21st century. Although Caritas, Catholic Action (KAÖ) and the religious congregations refer to numerous diaconal and socio-political tasks (poverty, climate change, migration, etc.), and the relevance of diaconal work is mentioned at congregational level, a strong internal orientation and a certain lack of diaconal and socio-political contributions are noticeable. Topics such as ecumenism or inter-religious dialogue were also only addressed in individual diocesan syntheses. The engagement with the "signs of the times" is mostly weaker than the inner-church topics.

4. Consequences

The synodal process should be continued and requires national and diocesan institutionalisation for this. In the process, the synodal methodology as a style and attitude of listening should be further disseminated and practised, as this special way of listening and exchanging arguments is not yet widely known in the Austrian Church. Moreover, those persons, groups etc. who have not been involved so far should be actively included.

The synodal methodology ("hearing circles") is, due to its rules, excellently suited for exchanging experiences or personal approaches and thus learning to listen to and understand each other. For the future, however, there is a need for forms of exchanging factual arguments and (necessary) conflicts. The synodal experiences can form a good basis for this.

The question of how to reach decisions remained open and was voiced many times. This requires a discernment of spirits. In my perception, this process has hardly taken place, as the criteria and method for it are unclear. The discernment of spirits should not be done by the bishops alone, but also with the involvement of the faithful: Austria has numerous theologically educated lay people for this purpose. Moreover, university theology is also called upon to become more involved.

Some of the concerns and wishes of the faithful can and should already be implemented at diocesan level, including the promotion of gender justice and women in leadership positions, strengthening transparency and participation, pastoral care with so-called "marginalised groups", etc.

The bishops should courageously raise and explain those concerns and arguments that can only be decided by the universal Church at the following Synods of Bishops - for they are also advocates for their faithful. They do not have to share these concerns, but they should not hastily drop difficult issues under the table in anticipatory obedience.

The strong internal orientation of the Austrian Church requires a broadening of horizons beyond church boundaries in order to fulfil the mission of the Church in the context of multiple crises. This includes deepened faith formation and an intensified confrontation with the signs of the times. These are indispensable even if reform wishes are not fulfilled.