



“A Synod which opens up spaces”

German bishops take stock at the end of the World Synod

The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops came to an end in Rome today (29 October 2023). More than 350 participants have come together in the Vatican since 4 October 2023 under the motto “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”. Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing (Limburg), Bishop Dr Felix Genn (Münster), Bishop Dr Stefan Oster SDB (Passau), Bishop Dr Bertram Meier (Augsburg) and Bishop Dr Franz-Josef Overbeck (Essen) attended the deliberations as representatives of the German Bishops' Conference.

Summing up, the bishops stressed that all the deliberations and debates that had been a feature of the Synod were geared towards creating space for the Gospel, both in the fellowship of the ecclesial community, and in people's lives. “It is now up to the local Churches, and thus also up to us, to use these spaces which the Synod has opened up in order to continue to work on a synodal Church, to advance along the synodal paths, and thus to translate the momentum into concrete reflection and action in such a way that it can then inform the World Synod 2024, which is to take place in one year's time. To this end, we in Germany will be making use of the synthesis report presented yesterday evening, which serves as a continuing guideline for our actions with the coming year in mind,” the bishops said.

We have documented the personal, complementary conclusions of the bishops below:

Bishop Dr Felix Genn

“It was a synod that opened up spaces. This image suggests itself because, for the first time, a Synod did not meet as usual in the relative confines of the Synodal Aula in the Vatican, but in the vastness of the Paul VI Audience Hall. The image went around the world of the members of the Synod – both women and men – gathered at round tables to engage in discussion, and this will certainly linger as a memorable impression of this Synod. At the same time, the Synod has opened up spaces for encounters in a communion of the Church that spans the globe, and spaces in which to pray and celebrate the liturgy together. We have been impressed by encountering so many representatives from local Churches at this global event. The new seating arrangements and the programme

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management, which placed particular emphasis on exchanges in the 'circoli minori', the working groups that were repeatedly reconstituted, opened up spaces for intensive dialogue. The method of 'conversation in the Holy Spirit' helped us to listen to one another, and also to trace in the words and testimonies of others what the Holy Spirit wants to say to His Church in the 21st Century."

Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing, Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference

"The Synod has also opened up spaces for strengthening participation, as demonstrated by the participation – for the first time – of lay people, and in particular also of women, as full voting members of the Synod. Particular significance attaches in the discussions and text contributions, and not least in the synthesis, to the question of how the Church can open up new spaces for the participation of the faithful at all levels. This suggests itself because the central question on which the entire synodal process pivots is that of how the Church can develop into a more synodal Church which takes synodality seriously as a 'modus vivendi et operandi'. Transparent, reliable synodal structures at all levels of the Church which are also linked to binding accountability are indispensable for this. This is valid amongst other things, or indeed especially, because it permits the systemic causes of sexual violence, abuse of power and cover-ups in the Church to be addressed. We have introduced this into the discussions during the Synod. We also raised the experiences, issues and concerns of the Church in the Synodal Path in Germany, both in the working groups and in the plenary sessions. It was impressive to observe that the issues which move us in a special way were put into words in this Synod in contributions coming from all the continents of the world."

Bishop Dr Franz-Josef Overbeck

"It became abundantly clear at this Synod that the question of opportunities for women to participate in the Church is particularly important with a view to improving the involvement of the faithful. This can also be seen as a good example of the Synod having given space to the 'signs of the times' which, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the Church must search for at all times, and which She must interpret in the light of the Gospel. It was pointedly emphasised at the Synod that the Church must not be thought and lived in static terms, but that She must be dynamic and ready for change. It will also be important for us in the future in this process not to forget to talk about and reflect on God and the message of Jesus. For the Church is an instrument of God's message, She is a means and an end. Crucial to this is a dynamic concept of tradition that has the living transmission of faith at its core."

Bishop Dr Bertram Meier

"Great importance attaches to the aspect that there is a hierarchy with regard to the truths of the faith, i.e. that not all aspects of the tradition take on the same relevance for the faith of the Church and for the lives of the faithful. At the centre is the person of Jesus Christ and His liberating, joy-giving Gospel, which brings His disciples together in the communion of the Church. The emphasis placed on such a self-critical understanding of tradition and doctrine

opens up spaces for a dynamic proclamation that reaches out to people and into their circumstances. Spaces have also been opened up by the fact that the Synod has taken up the ground-breaking initiative of Pope Francis to promote 'healthy decentralisation' in the Church. The fact that faith requires inculturation, in other words that it can only be communicated to people if it is close to their lives and lifestyles, means that the detailed circumstances of church life and action must be and may be different in different countries, societies and pastoral situations. The Synod has shown, firstly, that there are many specific questions that are faced by local Churches all over the world in a similar way. At the same time, however, the Synod has made it clear that the concrete answers cannot always be identical because differences and a lack of simultaneity mean that new paths have to be sought out and tested in different ways.”

Bishop Dr Stefan Oster SDB

“If we ask ourselves what the reason is why the Church should actually become more synodal, the answer of this Synod is: for mission, for the mission of the Church. A synodal Church is to be a communion that reaches out. Not least because everyone is invited to come along and take part. A synodal Church is enlivened by the Holy Spirit, and lives from the mission to make the redemptive work of Jesus present in the world and for every human being. That is why we also discussed whether the wording should in fact not be: 'The Church has a mission', but rather even more accentuated: 'Jesus has a mission into the world – and for that He has a Church'. These four weeks have therefore also heightened my awareness of the fact that the Church has been intensively occupied with Herself, but this has been for the very purpose that She should go out and bear witness to the Gospel for all people in a new and encouraged way. Moreover, this too needs to take place in an ecumenical spirit. This means in turn that if we all really learn together to overcome polarisation, because we are already united through our baptism, then this is a great witness in such a polarised world and in a polarised Church.”

N.B.:

You can find more information on the World Synod (in German) at www.dbk.de in the section entitled [Bischofssynode Synodale Kirche 2021–2024](#).

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The German Bishops' Conference is an association of the Roman-Catholic bishops of all dioceses in Germany. It currently has 64 members (as per: October 2023) from the 27 German dioceses. The German Bishops' Conference was established to promote joint pastoral tasks, to advise one another, to coordinate the Church's work, to jointly adopt decisions and to maintain contact with other Bishops' Conferences. The highest body of the German Bishops' Conference is the Plenary Assembly of all bishops, at which the bishops regularly meet in spring and autumn for several days.