

How can we be a synodal church in mission?

Austrian report on the preparation of the Instrumentum Laboris for the second Synod Assembly in October 2024.

1 Background to this report

The in-depth examination of the synthesis report of the World Synod (SB) in autumn 2023 took place in Austria in two ways. Firstly, the dioceses were invited to select at least one topic for the synthesis and to work on it using the key question ‘How can we be a synodal church in mission?’ with the help of experts from pastoral practice, theology, canon law and the human and social sciences. This took place in the participating dioceses in various circles: in the pastoral and diocesan councils, vicariate councils, priests' councils, seminaries, Caritas, women's networks and commissions, professional group representatives, areas of pastoral services and school boards as well as the Austrian Conference of Religious as well as a Diocesan pastoral day. In many dioceses, more than one topic was dealt with. Secondly, the synthesis report was divided into ten sections. Each section was entrusted to a bishop and discussed in depth with selected representatives of church organisations and experts. A majority of the participants worked with the ‘conversation in the spirit’ method. The following report presents the topics dealt with in the submissions according to the following criteria: a) Frequency of the topic; b) Representativeness of the working group for the groups of people represented, whereby the diocesan contributions were prioritised in the weighting. The presentation therefore does not follow the chapters of the synthesis report, but rather documents the priorities of those involved in Austria.

2 Women in the Life and Mission of the Church (SB 9)

In the feedback, the ‘women's issue’ is of outstanding importance for being a credible church of mission. The Austrian church has had good experiences with women in church leadership positions, but this appears to be only a partial answer. There are complaints about an enormous loss of credibility for the church and, in connection with this, a massive threat to its mission as long as this issue is not (comprehensively) satisfactorily resolved.

While the priesthood of women is mentioned sporadically, there is a strong opinion, supported by a majority in the dioceses (including diocesan leadership, Linz deacons), in favour of admitting women to the diaconate. It is argued that ‘the mission of the Church into our world is obscured and sometimes made impossible because women are currently not able to represent what they live in a sacramentally strengthened way through ordination. Just as the early Christian community recognised in Acts 6 that a (new) ministry was needed for the mission of the church, we recognise today that this ministry, which is sacramentally conferred through the laying on of hands, needs to be opened up to women so that the church can adequately fulfil its mission in the 21st century. Those who work in the vineyard of the Lord also need the tools for sacramental action.’

The opening of the diaconate to women is seen as being in line with the Second Vatican Council in two ways: On the one hand, because the Second Vatican Council ‘identified the commitment to equal rights for women also within the Church as a “sign of the times” which, theologically reflected, must lead to decisions on the vocation to the ordained ministry (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 8, 9, 29, 52). On the other hand, LG 28 and 29 continued the old ecclesial sense of the diaconate as a ministry. As this ministry is already carried out by women and men today, it is ‘time to recognise this in terms of the theology of ministry and sacraments and to open up the permanent diaconate within the one *ordo* to women and men.’ On the basis of a theologically sound fundamental decision, canon law could be adapted accordingly. As a result, the vocations experienced by women could be recognised and examined, training could be offered and women could be ordained to the sacramental diaconate in the local churches.

Such a step could also benefit the church's global efforts to combat poverty and discrimination against women, as it would be less suspected of being partly responsible for the disadvantage and discrimination of women through its own structures. This would also strengthen this area of their mission, which is regarded as important, and increase its credibility.

3 Church is Mission (SB8)

Mission is understood as dialogue: The church opens up spaces for people to share their faith. Mission means being present in where people live and sharing life with them. Mission is practical, i.e. helping to build the kingdom of God and in particular reaching out to people outside the church and on the margins of society. Mission requires inculturation, i.e. culturally compatible forms. In this regard, it is noted that SB 8 does not always correspond to the situation in German-speaking countries. Mission is understood as 'becoming church' - if it is inclusive as an inviting church, i.e. it does not exclude anyone and is open to different social groups. The focus on the family as the central subject of mission as the 'backbone of the church' is viewed critically, because in German-speaking countries it is no longer exclusively families ('domestic church') that support the church, but trans-familial communities and congregations are increasingly realising the mission of the church. It emphasises that thanks to the grace of baptism, all believers are called to mission: 'Every Christian is a mission'. At the same time, there is a lack of clarification of the specific vocation of priests in mission. Priests can, for example, remind people that prayer is a prerequisite for mission and form, support and strengthen communities for their service. The 'qualities' of missionary Christians are also described in detail: the courage to bear witness, personal credibility and the ability to listen to people in an appreciative manner and respond to their needs - especially in relation to critical people or in conflicts. Skills for Spiritual direction are also becoming more important. Education is regarded as fundamental: the willingness to change attitudes, the acquisition of 'soft skills in communication', above all the personal deepening of one's own spirituality in connection with the new discovery/rediscovery of the sources of the Christian faith. Special attention is paid to the acquisition of an understandable language.

Finally, reference is made to the structural framework of the mission, i.e. that lay people already play an important role in the mission in Austria in view of the shortage of priests. Pastoral care teams and small groups are therefore helpful in the mission. Cooperation between priests and lay people is explicitly desired. Lay people need appropriate training for the preaching ministry, and lay preaching is also being considered. There is a certain scepticism towards the creation of new ministries, as this could restrict the contribution of "everyday Christianity". In general, it is clear that the church in Austria is learning and must learn mission anew.

4 Structures for Participation (SB 18)

Diocesan committees in the Austrian dioceses have historically developed differently and so are organised differently. A central challenge for many church committees is to break up monocultures and involve different milieus, age groups, lifestyles and approaches to faith and thus become a visible and recognisable inclusive church. We are well aware that diverse and large committees require more energy, more professional meeting preparation and management, as well as clarity and transparency in terms of communication, processes and decisions. However, the co-operation between priests and lay people and the equal participation in shaping the life of the church is seen as a priority for the credibility of a synodal church. 'Consecrated and non-consecrated persons [should] be involved in decisions at all levels of the church', 'a culture of genuine co-decision-making must be developed, not just consultation or participation in decision-making'. After all, responsible leadership in a synodal church 'requires participation and listening; transparent decision-making processes; equality of all baptised persons regardless of gender, age or origin; clarity of responsibilities and comprehensible structures'. If practised well, participatory committees can help to lighten the 'heavy load' that some committee members carry.

The accountability of functioning bodies both internally and externally, as well as transparency and truthfulness in relation to this accountability, are also emphasised. Self-reflection and self-evaluation help to fulfil this ideal.

Even if it is assumed that the tension between the synodal and hierarchical constitution of the church will ultimately remain, the need to make this tension fruitful through (new) forms and structures of cooperation is emphasised.

5 Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church (SB 11)

The opinions of the clergy involved show a desire for ‘teamwork’ with the laity - on the basis of ‘common baptismal grace in various charisms and ministries’. The emphasis on the need for reform, which could be confused with a ‘break’ with tradition, and the ‘anti-clericalism’ cause ‘unease’. It is suggested that it be communicated to priests that they fulfil an essential ministry in the church. Furthermore, the concept of ‘clericalism’ needs clarification: for example, it would be important to better distinguish between the legitimate and clerical exercise of power. The cooperation between clergy and laity is not always well implemented, especially with women. Decisions made by clergy in non-transparent ways are criticised.

The demands placed on priests today call for new forms of priestly ministry. It is recommended that the admission to orders be broadened and that regional solutions with trial phases be considered. Priests need ‘spiritual leadership’ and sensitivity to the tension between leadership and participation. There is a desire to individualise formation (incl. orientated to charisms), i.e. to respond to the different starting points (age, previous education, cultural background, etc.) and to strengthen the individual person (psychologically) in the promotion of self-reliance and community skills and to train them in the service character of ministry. A differentiated balance between individual training, embedding in community and parish work in small training groups and with seminary staff with a high quality of leadership and support (including women) appears to be just as desirable as co-operation with lay people in pastoral professions and the facilitation of world church experience.

It is necessary to better prepare and accompany celibate living as a ‘last remnant of Christian radicalism’ and to embed it in various forms of community life. A ‘temporary’ celibacy could also be considered. An unsuccessful celibate life can also result in illness. The treatment of ‘priests without a ministry’ should be reconsidered with regard to the obligation to provide care for them or a renewed deployment of laicised priests after the death of a spouse or a divorce.

The diaconate needs a clearer role profile, as the Austrian “speciality” of pastoral assistants already leads to confusion and the introduction of new ministries would further blur the roles. The role of the deacon as a ‘seismograph’, ‘bridge builder’ and ‘committed person’ in social issues, in particular his service to the poor, is explicitly emphasised. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick should be open to all pastoral workers working with the sick. It would be useful to address the issue of the impediment to marriage for permanent deacons in the event of the death of the spouse and remarriage with the Dicastery for the Clergy.

6 A synodal approach for initial and ongoing formation (SB 11)

The topics of education and training run like a common thread through many submissions. Pursuing a synodal approach to education means, first and foremost, offering holistic human education and thus promoting (life-long) growth and development of the whole person. This includes spiritual and faith formation as well as education in other areas. It is an art to ‘meet people where they are’ and to accompany them in the development of their unique personality. To do this, it is first necessary to listen, but then also to cultivate a language that is true to life. Church educational institutions such as kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities and educational centres have a bridging function and special responsibility here. With their claim to offer an alternative to the reduction of education to purely functionalist educational interests, they are attractive to many and are also very popular at a time when many other church institutions are struggling with dwindling interest. It is important to utilise this in the sense of a synodal understanding of education and to deal with it responsibly.

Particular attention is paid to the initial and ongoing training of priests and other pastoral professionals. It emphasises the importance of holistic human education as a central component of basic training. Regular and, where possible, joint further education and training is seen as a necessity and obligation for all those involved in pastoral work. In addition, an appropriate structural anchoring of the concern for a qualitative approach to other religions is encouraged - through basic knowledge of religious studies, encounters and dialogue as well as theological reflection.

The development of a basic training programme is recommended for people who work in the church or in church-run schools but who are actually far removed from the faith.

7 Entrance into the community of Faith: Christian Initiation (SB 3)

The topic of language and liturgy is given greater attention in the context of SB 3, because depending on their quality and design, they either make access to the church easier or more difficult. In order to ensure a high-quality liturgy, a concrete catalogue of criteria and clear feedback structures are suggested. The great importance of language is emphasised: communicative soft skills and comprehensible, high-quality language are indispensable, especially with regard to priests. 'Only through language can the word reach the heart and trigger something.' Liturgy should enable people to join in the celebration in the most accessible way possible; at the same time, it requires 'mystagogy', a conscious introduction to the mystery. The diversity of liturgical forms can be cultivated as a richness.

The importance of blessing is also particularly emphasised: 'It is a great asset and a great potential of the church that it can give blessing in a high-quality form' – for example where parents no longer wish for baptism, but rather blessing for their child. Where children and (to a small but growing extent) adults are baptised, it is important to consider and support the 'accompanying party' (parents, godparents, parish community) in the initiation process (which goes beyond baptism).

8 The Bishop in the Ecclesial community (SB 12)

In view of the high expectations of the office of bishop, some aspects that are currently particularly relevant are emphasised. As a visible sign of unity, the bishop, like an 'weaver', can promote the unity of the community, accompany it and provide it with orientation so that the goal remains in view. At the same time, the diversity of people, groups and points of view, especially weaker ones, must be promoted, managed and included, in an inclusive manner. The bishop, 'looking over Jesus' shoulder, as it were, is the "hub" in a "dynamic network structure". He upholds tradition and at the same time promotes innovation. Above all, he provides 'spaces' for God's work and awakens and keeps the question of God alive.

Clear, courageous and decisive leadership is required to fulfil these tasks. At the same time, the use of power must be scrutinised: among other things, through a willingness to self-relate, to promote shared responsibility, transparency and evaluation of decisions, to continue learning and to listen. It is also necessary to strengthen participation (especially of the laity) under canon law: the 'right of appeal' could be expanded throughout the church and a commitment to synodal bodies could be formulated. It is proposed that the mode of episcopal decisions - especially if they do not follow prior consultations - be reconsidered with regard to its transparency. It is considered important to enhance and strengthen the role of bishops' conferences and collegiality at national and international level: Bishops' conferences could, for example, be involved in the search for candidates for the episcopate, in the appointment of bishops or the review of episcopal actions. Last but not least, the question arises: is the Magisterium synodal, i.e. part of this process?

9 The poor, protagonists on the path of the Church (SB 4)

In Austria, 15% of the population are at risk of poverty, and women are particularly affected. Moreover, poverty has many faces: poverty in relationships (loneliness); lack of access to housing, education and care. People

suffering from alcoholism and addiction, people with disabilities, people who have committed offences, refugees and people from other countries are affected by poverty. Spiritual isolation and voicelessness in relation to religious experiences or dealing with death are forms of spiritual poverty.

Caritas is committed to ensuring that no one is left behind on the common path of charity. The fight against poverty goes beyond charitable action and includes the commitment to (international) social and ecological justice. In their work, Caritas organisations refer to Catholic social teaching, in particular *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli tutti*. They are guided by the vision of a civilisation of love, solidarity and justice, in which the dignity of every human being is respected and upheld, and every person can live in peace and freedom as part of humanity without exclusion, discrimination and dehumanising poverty, and special attention is paid to the most vulnerable.

The concrete tasks of the church include the prophetic denunciation of injustice and social ills as well as the strengthening of believers and communities that are involved in issues such as migration, globalisation and responsibility for creation. However, it is also recognised that the church in Austria itself has a need to learn: responsibility for combating poverty must not just be delegated to Caritas, the internal handling of money should become more transparent and the topic should be implemented as an integral part of church education processes. The awareness of the co-responsibility for a global socio-ecological transformation as well as a view of the poor as protagonists on the path of the church still needs to be awakened in many believers.

10 One church from all tribes, peoples and nations (SB 5)

Strengthening a synodal church also essentially means shaping the church as a community of faith, solidarity and learning, 'going to the margins and addressing and supporting those parts of society that belong to marginalised groups'. The Austrian church can learn a lot from and with partner dioceses and organisations, e.g. fearless commitment to others, putting oneself at the service of socio-political concerns, the solidary 'orientation of international work towards the needs of disadvantaged population groups', the 'advocacy of human dignity, humane development and holistic liberation'. 'In the learning community, the focus should be on how we can learn from each other in the face of different contexts and challenges to live out the preferential option for the poor.' The prerequisite for this is a dialogue based on the recognition and appreciation of existing diversity, which does not see "otherness" as exotic, but rather strives for understanding, tolerance of differences and acceptance without devaluation.

In concrete terms, this dialogue is practised in Austria in the 'development policy community', in a university programme to support women from the world church in acquiring higher theological qualifications, in contact with priests and religious from the world church, who are experienced both 'as an enrichment and a challenge' in the dioceses, and last but not least in the military diocese. The latter has dealt with SB 5 in a special way, as the Austrian Armed Forces represent a broad social spectrum with a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds, and there is also a long tradition of interdenominational co-operation.

Appreciation, respect, openness and meeting "at eye level" are cited as key elements for successful cooperation across ideological, religious and denominational boundaries, as well as a firm commitment to the value of one's own and the consistent unity of speech and action. A common language and commitment to a common cause also prove helpful in building bridges in a pluralistic society.

Excursus: Interreligious Dialogue

In Austria, over decades organisations, structures and initiatives for interreligious dialogue, including the Austrian Armed Forces have provided important and proven space for cross-religious learning. However, the existence of other religions is still met with an exclusivist sense of superiority, undifferentiated relativisation or de facto ignorance in many areas of the church. If the synodal concerns are not to remain mere lip service, concrete proposals are urgently needed. Training for interreligious dialogue must be structurally anchored. Given the important role of the Eastern Catholic churches, it should not be overlooked that their experiences of persecution and violence are sometimes transferred to Western Europe. The Catholic positioning of

interreligious dialogue in the missionary context should be formulated more carefully with regard to external perception. Interreligious dialogue can also take place in ecumenical cooperation. Together, the religious communities could work for peace and vigilantly and actively resist the political appropriation of religion. Publicly dealing with one's own Catholic confession - which is practised rather cautiously in Austria - represents a challenge in the context of cultural diversity: Encouragement to actively witness to one's faith is needed here.

11 On the way to Christian Unity (SB 7)

In Austria, there is well-functioning cooperation and close integration between Christian denominations at the level of church leadership and in everyday church life (e.g. hospital, prison, elderly and military chaplaincy, religious education, etc.). In this way, ecumenism can contribute an essential experience for the mission of the church: for intercultural coexistence, for the struggle for unity in diversity, for symbolic communication (e.g. in spiritual celebrations), for the practice of solidarity, for dealing with the tension between foreignness and identity in relation to others, for the culture of conflict and for deepening the understanding of one's own denomination. The separation of churches is experienced as a motivation to grow in one's own power of conviction and at the same time to allow oneself to be questioned. A decisive challenge for the future of Christianity in Western Europe is the question of how the Christian message and Christian values can be proclaimed in interdenominational coexistence. With a view to young people, it would also be important to introduce life-relevant and practical topics such as climate and environmental protection or the commitment to peace into ecumenism. The Ecumenical Commission would like to see visible signs from the Synod, such as the adoption of the Julian date of Easter in consultation with other Eastern churches and the recognition and liturgical use of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed without the filioque as the basic form of the creed, as it is already used in ecumenical services. It is proposed that Eucharistic hospitality should be made possible for couples who are united in faith. New church initiatives should also be subjected to an 'ecumenical compatibility test'.

12 Missionaries in the Digital World (SB 17)

Based on the observation that young people are often mentioned in the SB, but that no separate chapter is dedicated to them, the discussion took place partly in connection with SB 17. From the perspective of children and young people, the SB is viewed critically in some cases: the language of the document is characterised as elitist and assuming a basic theological education, a clear objective is missed as well as the (more detailed) naming of burning questions and concrete solutions or proposals. However, positive aspects are also emphasised, including the focus on young people and the discussion of digitalisation.

With regard to the latter, it is stated that 'the digital space is part of people's lives and people, especially young people, who spend a lot of time in the digital space' and that the church therefore needs a greater presence in the digital world. It is proposed, for example, to create an umbrella organisation 'Digital Church Austria', 'which supports, networks, professionalises, promotes, etc.' With regard to social media platforms, some of which operate in an ethically questionable manner, it is suggested that we work towards the creation of new, ethically sound platforms, but in the meantime address people where they are. Furthermore, the aim of digital pastoral care is seen as building and maintaining relationships that are not limited to the digital space, but should extend beyond it: 'The digital space simply serves as a tool.'

Another important suggestion concerns the provision of high-quality information online: Since AI is increasingly taking over interpretations, it is important that the church provides the relevant knowledge online that AI can access.

13 Religious Communities, Consecrated life (SB 10)

Religious orders, which are characterised in the synod paper as a 'charismatic sign', experience on the one hand a lack of understanding or overemphasis in Austria, while at the same time 'also attention and interest

for their commitment, their points of view, spirituality and way of life'. Their different spiritual profiles can enrich the local church. In the face of ecclesial and social upheaval, they are also confronted with the task of rediscovering their identity for today. In this context, keeping open the question of transcendence, of what goes beyond the everyday and the inner world, is of central importance, as is life in communities (also inspiring beyond the church interior) in a time of individualisation - with all the challenges and opportunities this entails. In this way, religious communities can be hopeful places of learning for dialogue, respectful treatment of differences and increasingly also for cooperation between women and men (which is experienced as enriching and 'converting'). In view of the sometimes-tense relationships between bishops and religious, the latter would like to have an open dialogue on questions of (formative) power. They are convinced that the entire church 'can learn from the religious church because it is not only male-centred and synodal from the outset'.

14 Promoting the synodality of theology in the mission of the Church

Even if theology does not have its own chapter in the synthesis, it faces the task of becoming more synodal in the mission of the church. Thus, the challenge lies in shaping the tension between the demands of an exact science and the connection with spirituality and spiritual deepening. Theology is not just an abstract, intellectual theory, but also life-sustaining knowledge. In addition to orthodoxy and orthopraxy, it also promotes orthopathos, i.e. right affectivity. In dialog with pastoral reality and the world church, with society and politics, other sciences and religions and international theologies, it could become more attractive through more inter- and transdisciplinarity. In doing so, it has a service character. To do this, it must also learn to listen better and be capable of connecting and in need of enrichment. Of course, this also applies to the church's teaching ministry: How does it deal with irritating theological findings, for example?

The study of theology is also a space for practicing synodality and can open up communication spaces for this, as well as support students to go out into the social, international and global church space. Studies should be open to different biographical approaches, promote multi-perspective thinking and give more space to aesthetics and art. Times of crisis require more theological education, not less.

A cultural change in the church and theology also includes the promotion of and tolerance towards plurality, including the establishment of the necessary structures. The tension between hierarchy and synodality should be reflected upon theologically in greater depth. For example, the question of how to move from listening to synodal subordination and decision-making remains open. There is frustration among many committed theologians and students in Austria with regard to church decisions. The role of theology in the synodal process to date is viewed critically. Although respect for the *Logos* of Christ obliges us to value theological reason, it has played a rather minor role to date. What is the structural place of theology? And which theologies are heard? With its "cultures of remembrance", theology can, for example, remind us that synodality has always been the church's instrument for resolving conflicts.

Outlook

Overall, the in-depth discussion in various parts of the Austrian church shows that the synodal process has arrived in Austria and is being taken up by many with gratitude and commitment. The Church in Austria is admittedly at the beginning of a journey here: in the coming years, it will be necessary to learn in a wide variety of areas and at all levels that synodality is not a special topic that can be put aside again with the second synodal assembly in October 2024, but rather implies an actual cultural change - in line with the concluding sentence of the submission by the Austrian Conference of Religious Orders: "The real gain of the synod is probably the method (and attitude) itself: speaking and listening without fear and giving space. It proves and proves itself again and again and makes new things possible."