



# #overcomingsilence

GERMANY - A local example of progress on communal decision making in the Catholic Church

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# HOW CAN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH MAKE DECISIONS IN WAYS THAT REPRESENT ALL THE FAITHFUL? HOW CAN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH LEAD BY EXAMPLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY? \_

## Synodality

**Synodality** is a concept that draws the attention of many people. The Pope, many theologians and various reform movements believe that synodality can break open the stifled hierarchic leadership structures of the Catholic Church and bring more communal models for how our Church makes decisions.

*Synodality* comes from the Greek word *synodos* and means “an assembly” or “a meeting.” It has the same meaning as the Latin word *concilium*, in which we recognize the commonly used word “council.” Pope Francis explained synodality as “walking together - laity, pastors, the bishop of Rome.” In a 2019 letter to German Catholics, Pope Francis wrote that at the core of synodality, there is “our communal way together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Synodality can take on various forms at all levels of the Catholic Church:



Global



Continental



Diocese



Bishops  
Conference

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *An das pilgernde Volk Gottes in Deutschland*. 29.6.2019

Voices of Faith has developed a separate educational resource about global synodal processes and our goal to allow women, in particular women religious, the right to vote at these synods. You can download this resource at [www.overcomingsilence.com](http://www.overcomingsilence.com).

This document focuses on synodal processes on the level of diocese or a bishops' conference in the German Church as an example of a country where such processes are planned for 2020. Australia is another country that has scheduled a plenary council in 2020.



# WHAT DOES CANON LAW SAY ABOUT DECISION MAKING PROCESSES?\_

Canon law describes two types  
of communal processes:

## 1

*Particular Council* in a form of a:

- Plenary Council (organized for all parts of one bishops' conference)
- Provincial Council (organized for all local Churches within one ecclesial province)

The Plenary or Provincial Council is a **gathering of bishops** in the given geographic area. The bishops can invite guests and experts, these participants have **however according to Canon Law no voting right.**<sup>2</sup>



**All these participants have a voting right.** However, the results of a diocesan synod are presented to the bishop who can accept them, change them or reject them entirely. **Only once the bishop has signed the decrees or resolutions of the synod can these be made public and become binding.**<sup>4</sup>

## 2

**Diocesan Synod** is a communal process in a particular diocese. Since the Second Vatican Council, over 900 diocesan synods have taken place all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Diocesan synods take on different forms in different parts of the world. For example, in Latin America, it is common to organize regular – sometimes even yearly – synods. In other parts of the world, synods are organized more irregularly and sparingly, sometimes in a process of structural changes, or focused on a specific topic such as youth, or in response to a particular crisis. Participants of a diocesan synod are:

- representatives of priests from the diocese
- representatives of lay people from the diocese
- superiors of female and male religious orders with houses in the diocese.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.katholisch.de/aktuelles/aktuelle-artikel/so-konnte-der-synodale-weg-der-bischofe-aussehen>  
<sup>4</sup> CIC 460 – 468



## THE WÜRZBURG SYNOD

The Würzburg Synod took place from 1971 to 1975 in the German city of Würzburg. The goal of the synod was to decide how to implement the results of the Second Vatican Council in all the dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany (the former West Germany).

Over 300 delegates gathered eight times during the four years. Bishops, priests, members of religious orders and lay representatives had **an equal vote**. The formal rules of the Würzburg Synod were approved by Pope Paul VI before the start of the synod.

One of the significant results of the synod was the opening of a wider range of roles for laity in pastoral care, theology and professional tasks within the Church. The Synod has voted on and approved documents on topics ranging from religious education, liturgy, marriage and family, to roles of laity in preaching.

Unfortunately, the untimely death of Cardinal Döpfner, who was the major driving force behind the synod, together with the developments in the German and global Catholic Church in the second half of 1970s, meant that many of the approved documents were never implemented.

The full library of the approved documents of the Würzburg Synod is available on the website of the German Bishops Conference. <sup>5</sup>



**THE JOURNEY OF  
SYNODALITY IS THE  
JOURNEY THAT GOD  
WANTS FROM HIS  
CHURCH IN THE  
THIRD MILLENNIUM.  
A SYNODAL CHURCH  
IS A LISTENING  
CHURCH, AWARE THAT  
LISTENING IS MORE  
THAN HEARING. IT IS A  
RECIPROCAL LISTENING  
IN WHICH EACH ONE  
HAS SOMETHING TO  
LEARN.” <sup>6</sup>**

Pope Francis

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dbk-shop.de/de/deutsche-bischofskonferenz/synodentexte/gemeinsame-synode-der-bistuemer/gemeinsame-synode-bistuemer-bundesrepublik-deutschland.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-calls-synodal-church-listens-learns-shares-mission>

## LAY REPRESENTATION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN GERMANY\_

Germany has a long-standing tradition of organized lay representation in the Catholic Church that goes back to mid-19th century. A regular meeting of all the Catholic associations, that is known today as Katholikentage (Catholic Days) started happening around this time.

In connection to this event, a leadership structure evolved to represent the various groups. Today, this structure is called the Central Committee of Catholics (Zentralkomitee der Katholiken, ZdK).<sup>7</sup>



The ZdK in its current form is made up from representatives of:

- 1 Various Catholic associations, including women's associations, youth associations, charitable organizations and lay movements,
- 2 Representatives selected from diocesan lay councils (Diözesan Räte)
- 3 Elected individuals, often high-profile persons from public and political life or academia.

The ZdK is the official body that represents laity in dialogue with the German Bishops Conference. The ZdK has a standing secretariat that conducts research and policy work on a variety of topics relevant to the society and the Catholic Church.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.zdk.de>

## There are several large women's Catholic associations in Germany such as:

- The German Catholic German Women's Associations (Katholische Deutsche Frauenbund, KDFB <sup>8</sup>)
- The Catholic Women's Community (katholische frauengemeinschaft, kfd <sup>9</sup>)

Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund 

KATHOLISCHE  
FRAUENGEMEINSCHAFT  
DEUTSCHLANDS 

These associations have been in existence for over one hundred years and the biggest one has close to half a million members. They are engaged in advocacy efforts for women in the society and, increasingly, in the Catholic Church. Various activities in the past three decades have advocated for women deacons or the inclusion of women in leadership positions in the German Catholic Church.

An association called Hildegardis Verein has developed a mentoring program in collaboration with the German Bishops Conference for women working in diocesan chanceries or Catholic organizations. Within a yearly program, women are paired with mentors as they prepare for leadership positions in the Catholic Church. <sup>10</sup>

In 2019, the two biggest Catholic Women's Associations called for full equality of women and men in access to all ministries and offices in the Catholic Church and started formal campaigns to work towards this goal.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.frauenbund.de/nc/startseite/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.kfd-bundesverband.de>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hildegardis-verein.de/kirche-im-mentoring.html>

## LOCAL EFFORTS\_



## Maria 2.0

Maria 2.0 is a new reform initiative that was founded in 2019 in response to the release of a comprehensive report on sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church known as MHG Report. The initiative was started by a small group of women in the German city of Münster.

In an open letter to Pope Francis, the women of Maria 2.0 write:

The men of our Church like to sing their praise to women. Paradoxically, men are the sole determiners of our participation in our Church. As of now, only one woman is tolerated among them: Mary. On her pedestal. She stands there. Reduced to silence.<sup>11</sup>

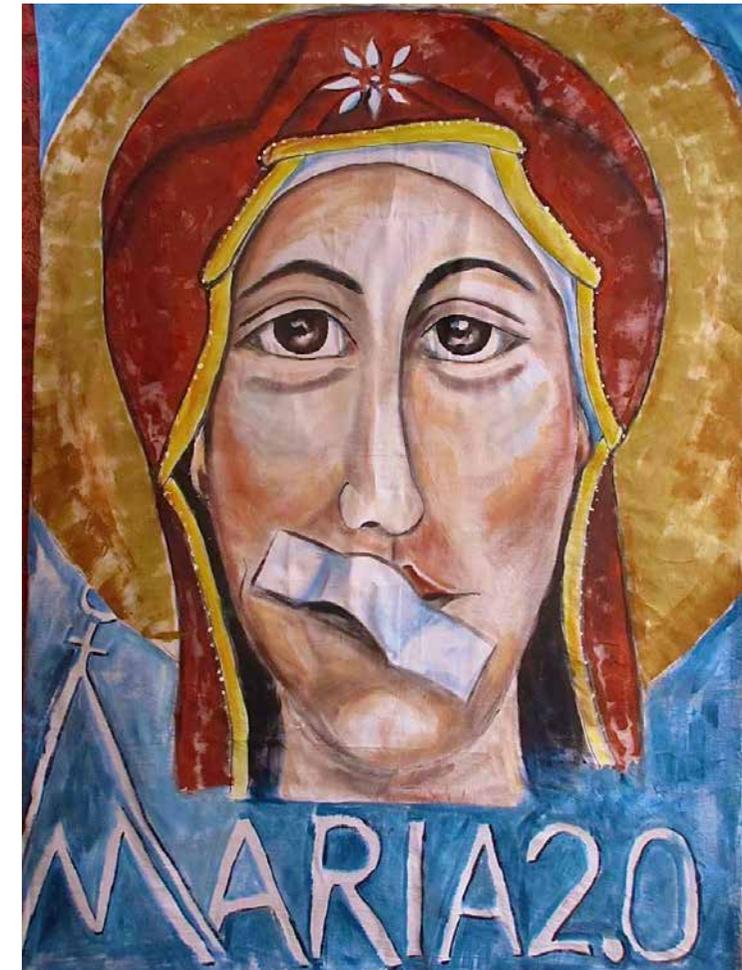
The women called for an action week throughout Germany, during which women were asked to stay away from Masses and voluntary engagement in the Church and instead gather visibly, pray and dialogue in front of churches.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mariazweipunktnull.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Maria20HandzettelOffenerBriefEnglisch.pdf>

**Maria 2.0 demands:**

- to deny office to those that have harmed others or have tolerated or covered up such wrongdoings
- to surrender all offenders to secular courts and to cooperate in all prosecutions without restrictions
- to allow women access to all church functions
- to abolish mandatory celibacy
- to align churchly sexual morals realistically with the reality of life.<sup>12</sup>

The initiative spread quickly and organically to many parts of Germany and was joined by the two biggest Catholic Women's Associations KDFB and kfd. Tens of thousands of women and men participated in the Action Week and more groups and parishes continue to organize protest actions, prayers and events throughout 2019 as this resource is being written.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>12</sup> <http://www.mariazweipunktnull.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Maria20HandzettelOffenerBriefEnglisch.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mariazweipunktnull.de>

## GERMANY: THE SYNODAL WAY 2020\_

Following the publication of a comprehensive report on sexual abuse of minors in Germany (the so-called MHG Report), Catholic faithful have been shocked and began mobilizing for change. Under massive public pressure, the German bishops decided in their plenary meeting in spring 2019 to prepare “a synodal way” for the German Church in 2020. The Bishops Conference committed to work in partnership with the Central Committee of the Catholics (Zentralkomitee der Katholiken, ZdK). Several preparatory meetings throughout 2019 should prepare the process. The official start of the synodal way is planned for the 1st Advent week in 2019 (starting on 1st December, 2019).



Four topical areas have been determined:

**1 Power, participation and division of powers**

**2 Sexual morality**

**3 Priestly living forms**

**4 Women in the ministries and offices of the Church**

Each of these topical areas is currently coordinated by one of the German Bishops and preliminary working groups and hearings have been organized to prepare initial documents for the various topics.

Because many see the current rules for synods and plenary councils as they are stated in Canon law as too limiting for full and equal participation of laity, it is planned to draft special rules and procedures for this synodal way, just like it was done for the Würzburg Synod. In September 2019, a conference will bring together extended teams from ZdK and the German Bishops Conference to further plan and agree on the working rules and procedures for the Synodal Way.

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Please add your voice to the **#overcomingsilence** movement and help us send a message to the Roman Curia and Pope Francis about women in leadership and decision making roles in the Catholic Church.

**If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact –**  
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