

Differently Catholic – still Roman Catholic?

Synodal Path at a Dead End

“Now more than ever! We won't let Rome tell us what to do!” This is one way to describe the behavior of many German bishops and synodal lay representatives after the ad limina visit of the German bishops to Rome in November. On this occasion they were able to give insights into the state of the so-called “Synodal Path” so far, and the Holy See also responded to this, in the form of Cardinals Ladaria (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith) and Ouellet (Dicastery for the Bishops). In their statements they were not afraid to raise concerns about various projects of the “Synodal Path,” to lay down the law, and even to propose a moratorium, which, however, as expected, did not meet with the approval of the majority of the German bishops. Nevertheless, this did not prevent a part of the German episcopate nor Irme Stetter-Karp (president of the Central Committee of German Catholics, ZdK) from continuing to insist on its reform issues and ignoring Roman objections.

Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck of Essen is pleased that the “basta communication” has not been successful and that it is necessary to stick to the German reform process¹. Georg Bätzing, the DBK (German Bishops' Conference) chairman and bishop of Limburg, continues to demand, “the access to church offices must be smoothed,”² and Irme Stetter-Karp, the president of the ZdK, stresses “that the wheel can not be turned back,”³ warns of a “reform brake,”⁴ and calls it “simply brazen, how the Vatican authorities (...) refused fundamental reforms of the church.”⁵ Thomas Schüller, canon lawyer with a university chair in Münster, even insults Pope Francis as a “Peronist populist” who despises the intellectual theology of the Germans.⁶ Nothing is known about consequences under service law for the chair holder. Critical voices from the DBK, such as that of Stefan Oster, the Bishop of Passau, that the

¹ <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/bischof-overbeck-ruegt-roemische-basta-kommunikation> of November 28, 2022.

² <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/bischof-baetzing-wirbt-fuer-staerkung-der-rolle-von-frauen> of November 25, 2022.

³ <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/stetter-karp-setzt-weiter-auf-synodalen-weg-deutschland> of November 22, 2022.

⁴ <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/stetter-karp-weist-fundamentalkritik-reformweg-zurueck> vom 19.11.2022.

⁵ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/synodaler-weg-zdk-praesidentin-kritisiert-den-vatikan-18523815.html> of December 09, 2022.

⁶ <https://web.de/magazine/panorama/kirchenrechtler-papst-franziskus-verachtet-kirche-deutschland-37491250> of November 19, 2022.

Roman interventions must be taken into account and the statement that essential aspects of the Gospel are not compatible with today's society⁷, on the other hand, are ignored or even scandalized by the broad majority of German bishops

However, it obviously depends on who is causing the "scandal". If one is on the "right" side, the side of the synodal presidium, all claims of sincerity and consistency no longer apply. A "witch hunt" has broken out against Archbishop Woelki of Cologne, with the aim of getting rid of a critical voice. At the same time, the member of the synodal presidium, Bishop Franz-Josef Bode (Osnabrück), refused demands to offer his resignation from office, although now a study of the University of Osnabrück on sexualized violence accuses him of having acted insufficiently in at least ten (!) cases of sexual abuse, which Bode incidentally commented in a faux pas with "only ten cases"⁸, while Archbishop Woelki was exonerated from any accusation of negligent handling of abusers⁹. Here double standards are applied shamelessly. Woelki, who was exonerated by the government, is to leave his office, while Bode, whose negligent behavior was established in several cases, sees no need to do so. His justification of "wanting to rebuild trust"¹⁰ is rather approved of unquestioningly by his fellow synod members. Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi? So how credible is a Synodal Path, which was created as a response to the MHG study on sexual abuse in the Catholic church, if it leaves in its presidium, of all people, a bishop who is heavily accused in dealing with abuse issues and a co-president who continues to speak out in favor of a nationwide availability of abortion clinics? Obviously, attitude in this circle is measured above all by the degree of closeness to the "differently Catholic" demands of the Synodal Path.

These demands are ultimately about a change of doctrine, about the creation of a church that is detached from the rest of the mystical body of Christ. Bishop Bätzing's vision of "We

⁷ <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/bischof-oster-sieht-skepsis-rom-zu-deutschen-reformideen> of November 19, 2022.

⁸ <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/jugendliche-nach-gespraech-mit-bischof-bode-irritiert> of November 30, 2022.

⁹ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/panorama/keine-ermittlungen-gegen-kolner-kardinal-woelki-4347760.html> of July 13, 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/missbrauch-vertrauen-in-osnabruecker-bischof-bode-tief-erschuettert> of December 8, 2022.

want to be catholic, but catholic in a different way”¹¹ is therefore a pipe dream that can never come true and must never come true if the rift between the Catholic Church in Germany and the universal Church is not to be deepened even more! Bätzing and his synodal heads must rather allow themselves to be asked how far their “differently Catholic” way is still Roman Catholic.

And further: How credible are or how desperate must bishops and their synodal comrades-in-arms be, who, beyond all diplomatic formulas, come back from Rome in the knowledge that none of the core demands of the German Synodal Way will survive the end of the world synodal process in 2023/24 and who nevertheless, against their better judgment, feed German Catholics with slogans of perseverance, because what must not be cannot be: the expected failure of the German Synodal Way? Trying to win allies abroad doesn't help either! If the frightening extent of polemics and disrespect of certain lay representatives of the Synodal Way towards the Holy Father and the Roman dicasteries were used here as a measure for the degree of despair, it must be enormous!

If this is what the announced “expectation management” of Bishop Bätzing looks like, the time until the end of the world synodal path will be lost time for the Catholic Church in Germany - a time that is urgently needed for real reforms! The Holy Father has not for nothing repeatedly, also during the ad limina visit of the German bishops, referred to his letter to the German Catholics from the summer of 2019! This is a guideline and task for all responsible persons in the Catholic Church in Germany - but especially for their shepherds, the bishops!

We demand of the bishops of Germany, therefore, to hold faithfully and without exceptions to the deposit of faith that does not pass away, and to work in unity with the Holy Father for its spread in society and the world.

¹¹ <https://www.die-tagespost.de/kirche/vatikan-und-papst/anders-katholisch-sein-art-233781> of November 19, 2022.