



Interpreting the “Signs of the Times” as a Challenge to the Church’s Mission from a German Perspective

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Interpretując „znaki czasu” jako wyzwanie dla misji Kościoła z perspektywy niemieckiej

STRESZCZENIE

„Droga Synodalna” (*Synodaler Weg*) w Niemczech była od początku rozumiana jako właściwa odpowiedź Kościoła katolickiego na „znaki czasu”. Kryzys związany z różnymi nadużyciami pozwolił zidentyfikować ramy instytucjonalne dla indywidualnych wykroczeń i przygotować propozycje reform, których celem było zapobieganie przyszłym nadużyciom i służenie wiarygodności Ewangelii. Artykuł przedstawia tło historyczne „Drogi Synodalnej” w Niemczech i zarysowuje interpretację „znaków czasu” przez delegatów Zgromadzenia Ogólnego. Umieszcza stanowiska „Drogi Synodalnej” w ogólnych debatach na podobne tematy, które mają miejsce w Kościele katolickim na skalę globalną. Uwagi końcowe oferują pewne teologiczne wyzwania dla dalszej refleksji nad „znakami czasu”.

Słowa kluczowe: „Droga Synodalna”, „znaki czasu”, kontekstualność, „*loci theologici*”, synodalność

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When the Second Vatican Council introduced the term “signs of the times” into several of its documents, it did not give a clear definition of what it meant.¹ It was therefore not surprising that, in the aftermath of the Council, various – and sometimes very different – proposals were made to identify “signs of the times” in modern history: globalisation, the ecological crisis, migration, secularisation, cultural diversification and individualisation, to name but a few. All these phenomena, which have become more or less evident in recent decades, have posed significant challenges to any kind

¹ Cf. Hans Waldenfels, „Zeichen der Zeit“, in *Die großen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, eds. Mariano Delgado, Michael Sieverich (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 101-119. On the problem of the term, see Alois Halbmayr, „Ist die Metapher von den »Zeichen der Zeit« eine Leerformel? Über einen theologischen Zentralbegriff im Wandel“, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 146 (2024), 243-266.

of theology that does not confine itself to explaining the tradition of faith, but seeks to relate it to the social, cultural and religious conditions that dominate human life in very different ways all over the world.

Recently, the abuse crisis has shaken the global Catholic Church in an unprecedented way. Since at least 2010, numerous cases of sexual and spiritual abuse have been uncovered in parishes, religious orders and religious movements. Recent popes and Vatican dicasteries have responded accordingly – but perhaps not always adequately. Many clergy and lay people around the world see the abuse crisis as a “sign of the times”, albeit a negative one, which is compelling the church to rethink its mission and structures.

On several occasions, Pope Francis (2013-2025) has identified a deep-rooted “clericalism” within the Church, not limited to clergy, as one of the causes of sexual and spiritual abuse. Others point to the lack of accountability of those responsible for the administration of the Church as a possible source of abuse. Still others believe that the subordinate role of women in the church contributes to a spirit of male-dominated decision-making that does not reflect the fullness of the gospel teaching about the kingdom of God.

If all these phenomena could be properly characterized as “signs of the times”, theology would be seriously challenged to engage with them in ways that offer alternatives to prevailing theological reasoning on pastoral practice, church structures and decision-making within the church. To be effective, such alternatives must have an impact on canon law.

During the worldwide “Synodal Process”, initiated by Pope Francis in 2021, every Catholic faithful was invited to self-critically assess their daily practice in order to improve their common witness and mission to proclaim the Gospel. The Pope encouraged all members of the Church to reflect constructively on the internal structures of parishes and dioceses. Not a few initiatives in this direction have been launched in different regions of the global Church. Among them is the so-called “Synodal Path” of the Catholic Church in Germany.

In the following I will first delineate the historical background and the theological perspective of the “Synodal Path” in Germany. Against this background I will outline the interpretation of the “signs of the times” by the delegates of the General Assembly. I will then situate the positions of the “Synodal Path” within the general debates on similar issues that are taking place in the Catholic Church on a global scale. The concluding remarks will offer some theological challenges for further reflection on the “signs of the times”.

1. Concerns about the Catholic Church in Germany

In recent years, both the Catholic Church in Germany and German theology have been viewed with great concern from a Polish perspective. Not surprisingly, suspicions have been focused on the so called “Synodal Path” initiated in 2019 by the German bishops together with the Catholic laity. Very early, Polish bishops have been sharply criticizing the “Synodal Path”.

In a letter from Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, the President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, to Pope Francis issued on 9 October 2023, the Archbishop passionately called for a return of the German bishops to the traditional teachings of the Church. Gadecki expressed his “deep concern” about the results of the German procedure. He contradicted key arguments and resolutions adopted by the “Synodal Path”. “In accordance with the teachings of the Church,” one should not give in to “worldly pressures or models of the prevailing culture”, the archbishop argued. “Let us avoid repeating hackneyed slogans and standard demands such as the abolition of celibacy, the priesthood of women, communion for remarried divorcees or the blessing of same-sex partnerships,” Gadecki contended.²

In referring to these issues, the Archbishop was referring, albeit implicitly, to the question of what phenomena in society can be considered “signs of the times” and, according to the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et spes* (GS 4; 11) must be considered by Catholic theology and the Church in their pastoral practice.

With regard to any “methodology for reading the signs of the times”, it is interesting to note that within the Catholic Church in Europe one is confronted with very different perceptions of the “signs of the times”. Assuming that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, how is it possible that different interpretations of reality and so many different practical conclusions can emerge within the Church?

Even more fundamentally asked: What are the “signs of the times”? Which criteria might be provided to identify “signs of the times” in history and society? And if there are such criteria – how can one justify them with respect to the ecclesial tradition? These questions touch on very fundamental theological and ecclesiological topics. How do Christians perceive their mission within an ever-changing world? How can one conceive the “development of dogma” within the church?³ What does it mean when the Second Vatican

² On 27 November, 2023, the Polish daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* published the letter from Bishop Gadecki to Pope Francis dated 9 October. The newspaper also published Bishop Bätzing’s reply dated 21 November.

³ Cf. Michael Seewald, *Theories of Doctrinal Development in the Catholic Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Council says that the Holy Spirit brings about in the Church “an ever deeper understanding of revelation” (DV 5)?

In the light of such fundamental theological questions, it might be helpful to explain the reasons why the Catholic Church in Germany has decided to launch her “Synodal Path” in precisely the way she did – a way, that has been strongly criticised by many but also welcomed by other voices.

2. Historical Background of the „Synodal Path” in Germany

The trigger event for the Synodal Path in Germany is a large-scale study on sexual abuse in the German Catholic Church, which was issued in 2018 (MHG-Studie). The study was commissioned by the German bishops who made efforts to explore in greater detail the causes of numerous cases of sexual violence against minors in parishes and institutions of the Catholic Church. Until the first public uncovering in 2010, most of the cases were silenced and covered up by the responsible authorities in the Church.

The publication of the Study prompted a deep upheaval among clerics and laypeople in Germany. It revealed numerous shortcomings and faults not only at the level of personal responsibility but at an institutional level in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Study suggested implementing measures to efficiently prevent recurrences.

The uncovered numerous cases of sexual violence led to a massive loss of trust in the Catholic Church and its credibility among the German population. The German bishops agreed that this loss of credibility could not be countered by further silence or even cover-ups. Both would have severely damaged the Church’s missionary work.

At the same time, there was a growing realization among bishops, priests and lay people that the many cases of sexual and spiritual abuse could not be blamed solely on the failings of individuals. Rather, the structural causes of abuse were being considered.

Under the impression of the findings and recommendations of the MHG-Study, the German Bishops’ Conference, at its spring assembly in 2019, addressed three topics to discuss: “The use of power in the Church”, “The future of the profession and image of priests”, and “Further development of Catholic sexual morality”. The bishops agreed that far-reaching steps would be required to address the problems shown in the study, renew the Church, and restore the credibility of the Church to convincingly preach the Gospel.

Very early, the bishops invited the representatives of the Catholic laity in Germany to cooperate in a process that finally should propose efficient measures to prevent sexual abuse in the Church. Willingly, the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) welcomed the invitation of the bishops.

In fact, the Committee played an active role in the process that lay ahead. In particular, it urged the inclusion of the topic “Women in the Church” as a fourth theme in the process.

Right from the outset, it was clear that the canonical form of a “synod” would present difficulties respecting the collaboration of laypeople. Joint consultations and decision-making would not be easy to implement. Consequently, “synodality” was enacted in a manner that would permit full voting rights for all stakeholders. The decision was taken to set out on a “Synodal Path” that – on the one hand – affords participation by every delegate to the General Assembly irrespective of being a cleric or not, and – on the other hand – respects the decision-making authority of the bishops based in Catholic ecclesiology and canon law.⁴

3. “Signs of the Times” on the “Synodal Path” in Germany

On 3rd February 2022, the General Assembly of the “Synodal Path” adopted a fundamental document called *Orientation Text*. The full title of the document is “On the Path of Conversion and Renewal. Theological Foundations of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany”. As the title indicates, the document is a foundational text of the “Synodal Path”, which indicates the direction the deputies intended to march.

In n. 11 of the *Orientation Text*, six “places of theology” are listed as sources of theological reflection on the four general topics of the “Synodal Path” mentioned above. The term “places of theology” obviously alludes to the “*loci theologici*” of Melchior Cano.⁵ At the end of the 16th century, the Dominican theologian systematised ten sources from which theology springs in order to mark the specific way of Catholic arguing. Cano listed seven “proper places” (*loci proprii*): first of all, Sacred Scripture, then apostolic tradition, fathers of the Church, ecumenical councils, Roman Magisterium etc. Finally, he lists three “foreign places” (*loci alieni*) of theology: human reason, philosophy, history.

The *Orientation Text* of the “Synodal Path” embraces this terminology in Part II, 9-12. It mentions the following six “places of theology”: Sacred Scripture and Tradition, the “signs of the times” and the faith of the People of God, the Magisterium and Theology. Obviously, the “signs of the times” are listed on an equal level compared to Sacred Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium.

⁴ Meanwhile, the Statutes and Rules of Procedure of the “Synodal Path”, its various working papers, documents, and resolutions are available on the Internet in the English language, accessed 19 May, 2025, <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english>.

⁵ Melchior Cano, *De locis theologicis*, ed. Juan Belda Plans, series *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* 85 (Madrid 2006). Cf. Bernhard Körner, *Orte des Glaubens – loci theologici. Studien zur theologischen Erkenntnislehre* (Würzburg 2014).

There have been voices inside and outside the General Assembly that have criticized the elevation of the “signs of the times” to “*loci theologici*” as contradictory to Catholic doctrine.⁶ Such critiques insisted on the priority of Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium. Against these voices, it may be recalled that Melchor Cano has already included “human experience” (*historia*) among the “alien theological places” (*loci theologici alieni*). In this sense, one might argue that human experience belongs to the “places of theology” and must be considered in theological reasoning.⁷

Some delegates to the General Assembly of the “Synodal Path” argued in favour of valuing the abuse-crisis in the Church as a negative “sign of the time” that encourages the Church to substantial conversion and renewal.⁸ However, due to their negative aspect, such proposals have not been explicitly received by the General Assembly.

According to the *Orientation Text*, a proper reading and understanding of the “signs of the times” encourages the development of doctrine and the reform of practice in the Church. The text insists on the normativity of the Holy Scripture but stresses the need for renewal within the Church: “The Holy Scriptures provide the criteria for evaluation because, read in God’s Spirit, they reveal the Word of God in its original meaning, which must be determined anew in any given time. The signs of the times indicate the direction in which the tradition must be further developed” (n. 34). The text insists on the normativity of Scripture, while at the same time is stressing the need for its interpretation. The question remains as to the criteria for such interpretation. If the “signs of the times” contribute to the interpretation of Scripture, the need to define them is still open.

In developing the doctrine of the Church, the original intention of the dogma must be preserved. Nevertheless, it must be expressed in such a way that it can be accepted and appropriated by Christian faithful who live under completely different circumstances compared to the origin of the dogma. Here the interpretation of the “signs of the times” comes into play.

⁶ For example, Cardinal Kurt Koch in an interview with Martin Lohmann on 28 September 2022, accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://www.kath.ch/medienspiegel/nur-die-wahrheit-macht-frei-und-nicht-die-freiheit-wahr/>. Samuel Aquila, Archbishop of Denver, stated on 4 May, 2024: “To surrender to the Zeitgeist is not a matter of reading the signs of the times; it is a betrayal of the Gospel”, accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://www.denvercatholic.org/archbishop-aquila-german-synodal-path-repudiates-the-deposit-of-faith>.

⁷ Cf. Peter Hünemann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre. Glaube – Überlieferung – Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster: Aschendorff-Verlag, 2003), 162-175, 207-251, 276-285.

⁸ Cf. Thomas Söding, “On the Way to Conversion and Renewal. Church Reforms in Germany and the Global Church”, in Catalina Cerda-Planas, Nora Kalbarczyk, Markus Lubet, series *Weltkirche und Mission*, 20 (Regensburg: Pustet-Verlag, 2024), 214-229. Söding is a professor of NT exegesis and a member of the presidency of the “Synodal Path”.

4. The “Signs of the times” as Triggers for Reform in the Church

The term “signs of the times” was coined by Pope John XXIII. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) he identified three signs of the times: that workers had become aware of their dignity, that women had entered public life, and that the peoples of the earth were working together for peace and justice.⁹ In his encyclical, the Pope does not give a definition of the term. However, it is clear that when he speaks of the “signs of the times” he has in mind cultural and social developments that are relevant to the faith and challenge the Church to review its self-understanding and practice.

The “signs of the times”, it could be argued, are signals that the Church cannot ignore, for this would be detrimental to its message and mission. It is therefore essential to know the situation of the Church in different cultural contexts in order to be able to interpret cultural and social developments in the light of the Gospel. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council says: “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other” (GS 4).

In recent times, when it comes to synodality, the *International Theological Commission* sees theology in particular as having a responsibility with regard to interpret the “signs of the times”: “In the Church’s synodal vocation, the charism of theology is called to offer a specific service: it involves listening to the Word of God, understanding faith in sapiential, scientific and prophetic ways, discerning the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and being in dialogue with society and cultures” (n. 75).¹⁰

Regarding the debates on the “Synodal Path” in Germany, three major “signs of the time” can be identified that inspired the deliberations of the delegates when they endeavoured to identify the sources of abuse in the Catholic Church and to counter the mistrust against ecclesial behaviour. Such mistrust was not confined to the secular society but also expressed by Christian faithful who feel deeply committed to the Catholic church.

Firstly, the *exercise of power* within the Church was one of the major points of debate during the “Synodal Path”. The delegates voted in favour of the introduction of effective measures of accountability in the exercise of the bishops’ ministry and administration. Such measures are well received in

⁹ John XXIII, *Encyclical »Pacem in Terris«*, accessed 21 May, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), accessed 21 May, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

liberal societies, they argued. Effective accountability measures involve institutional processes of checks and balances to prevent future abuse of power.

Obviously, the theological challenge consists in justifying the introduction of such measures into the institutional structures of the Church while preserving its hierarchical character. This need concerns in particular the office of the bishops.

A helpful text could be the Vatican Council's constitution *Lumen Gentium*, which describes the Church as a "compago socialis" composed of heavenly and earthly elements without any competition. The Council emphasises that the "visible assembly and the spiritual community", which are essential to any appropriate understanding of the Church, "are not to be considered as two realities". On the contrary: "Rather, they form a complex reality composed of a divine and a human element" (LG 8).

The Council regards the conjunction of heavenly and earthly elements in the incarnation of Christ as an analogy for the Church. From a theological perspective, the reference to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ signifies that neither nature is in competition with the other. As put by Pope Leo the Great in the 5th century, the human and the divine nature in Christ "operate what is proper to each in unity with the other"¹¹.

Analogically, it can be argued that when the Church employs joint decision-making and even decision-taking processes, such procedures are not in contradiction with its sacramental nature as expressed in LG 1. Quite the contrary: Based on the "sacramental nature" of the Church, one might be justified in concluding that the introduction of secular structures of consultation, participation and shared decision-making is a mandatory requirement for the Church. The structures of learning and joint decision-making that have been approved within secular institutions could serve as a model for the implementation of similar structures within the Church.

Such an approach should not necessarily raise concerns that the spiritual dimension of the Church is being diminished or even abandoned. The Christian doctrine that in Christ there is no contradiction between his divine and human natures allows for the assumption that the introduction of secular decision-making processes within the Church does not contravene its spiritual dimension.

A second "sign of the times" identified by the bishops and laity was the *role of women* in society compared to their role within the Catholic Church. While women in secular societies in Europe have gained more and more respect and influence during the 20th century, their position within the Catholic Church is still disregarded. One might interpret the changed view of the role

¹¹ Cf. Leo I, Letter to Flavian (28 June, 449), trans. B. Neil, *Leo the Great* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2009).

of women in society and its consequences for the Church as an irrefutable “sign of the times”, which challenges the Church theologically and practically. During the Synod on Amazonia (2019) at least, it became obvious that this challenge is not confined to Western societies. Furthermore, it does not only apply to the question of women’s access to the ordained ministry, but also to their status in church administration. In this regard, the General Assembly of the “Synodal Path” voted unanimously to strengthen the role of women in diaconal work and church administration. The German bishops should advocate the admission of women to the diaconate in Rome. Meanwhile, it is well known that the late Pope Francis appointed a number of women to high positions and responsibilities in the Vatican Curia.

A third “sign of the times” was the *perception of sexuality* within the Church. In this field, insights from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and medicine have been received by the delegates. The theme is not restricted to celibacy, sexual orientation and gender but also encompasses the regulation of employment within the church.

The General Assembly adopted several resolutions on this issue. They made a significant contribution to the meanwhile revised regulations on the employment of lay people in the Catholic Church in Germany. In November 2022, an amended “Basic Order” (Grundordnung) for working in the Catholic Church was approved. The regulations imply, among other things, that the “core area of private life, especially relationships and intimacy” will be exempt from legal assessment. Catholic employees will no longer face dismissal for entering into a second marriage or a same-sex relationship.

The vast majority of the delegates to the General Assembly of the “Synodal Path” considered these “signs of the times” – the exercise of power, the role of women, and the assessment of sexuality within the Church – as helpful in addressing the Church’s first challenge: regaining people’s trust in the Church in order to effectively proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. Contribution of the German „Synodal Path” to the Worldwide “Synodal Journey” of the Church

Quite a number of the topics debated on the “Synodal Path” in Germany have been resumed by the global “Synodal Journey” initiated by Pope Francis in 2021. A careful look at the *Final Document* of the XVI Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “Communion, Participation, Mission”, which was adopted in October 2024, reveals that many of the perspectives covered by the resolutions of the “Synodal Path” in Germany are reflected more or less explicitly in the document. This applies in particular to the question of the accountability of bishops and clergy in the exercise of their ministry.

The *Final Document* of the World Synod speaks, albeit briefly, in favour of lay participation in the election of bishops. “The bishop’s service is a service in, with and for the community,” it says referring to LG 20. Therefore, “the Synod Assembly desires that the people of God have a greater voice in the election of bishops” (n. 70).

The *Final Document* also makes several references to the handling of abuse in the Catholic Church. It recognizes the “untold and often lasting suffering to victims, survivors and their communities” (n. 55). In a time of global crisis of trust, the Church must “acknowledge its own shortcomings. It must humbly ask for forgiveness, must care for victims, provide for preventative measures, and strive in the Lord to rebuild mutual trust.” The Synod calls for “specific and appropriate training” for those who come into contact with minors and vulnerable people. A culture of prevention and protection is essential for the Church, the Document says (cf. n. 150).

Acknowledging the engagement of women in the mission of the church, the Synod concludes: “There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped” (n. 60). The Synod notes that despite their equal dignity through baptism, women still face obstacles in achieving fuller recognition of their own charisms, vocations and roles in various areas of the Church. To counter this, the Synod calls for “full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women.” Respecting the continuing historical and theological research, the *Final Document* states that “the question of women’s access to diaconal ministry remains open” (n. 60).

Other themes discussed on the German “Synodal Path” such as moral teaching on sexual matters and the question of sexual orientation, are not silenced in the *Final Document*, which was adopted immediately after the closure of the Synod by Pope Francis as an utterance of his ordinary magisterium. Despite continuing differences between opposing parties on some issues, which cannot be invalidated, it is evident that the German Catholic Church is not going down a “special path” or even initiating a “Second Reformation”.¹²

6. The German “Synodal Path” within the Global Church

Repeatedly, the delegates to the “Synodal Path” stressed that they understand their reflections and resolution as contributions to the worldwide

¹² Such a suspicion was uttered by Pope Francis during his speech to journalists on a flight from Bahrain to Rome in June, 2022. Cf. Saim Dušan Inayatullah, “Pope criticizes German Catholic reform movement”, accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/pope-criticizes-german-catholic-reform-movement/a-6366526>.

“Synodal Process.” In a letter issued on 29th August 2022 and accompanying a multilingual edition of the texts of the “Synodal Path”, Bishop Bätzing and Irme Stetter-Karp, the two presidents of the General Assembly, declared: “The issues discussed in our country and in our particular Church are also virulent in many other places in the World”.¹³

This perspective is clearly expressed in the so-called *Preamble Text*: “The Synodal Path of the Church in Germany is to contribute to the Synodal Journey of the Universal Church [...]. The Synodal Path takes up pressing questions that are of great importance not only in Germany, but also in other regions of the universal Church”. Especially the *Implementation Text* “Women in sacramental ministry – Perspectives for the Universal Church Dialogue” makes great efforts to stress that the issues addressed are not confined to Germany or the Western World. To confirm this statement, it is sufficient to refer to the *Final Document of the Amazon Synod* issued on 25th October 2019: in No. 99-103 the document argues unambiguously in favour of the ordination of women to sacramental diaconate.¹⁴

Meanwhile, this global perspective is proved by a survey that was operated at Sankt Georgen Theological Faculty in Frankfurt. Among other institutions, the campus hosts the “Institute for Global Church and Mission” (IWM).¹⁵ In 2022, the Institute conducted an empirical study in which former students of nontheological disciplines who received scholarships from the Catholic Church for studies in Germany have been asked about the topics of the “Synodal Path”.¹⁶

The purpose of this survey was to explore to which extent and in which way the topics of the “Synodal Path” are viewed from the perspective of other Global Church contexts. Conversely, it was questioned which topics the faithful in other cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts different from the Western world attach relevance to.

The Institute received 599 responses from 67 countries to the questionnaire. When the differences between the continental groups were analysed, the results showed significant differences not in principle but only between the regions. For example, the acceptance of homosexuality in Africa is significantly lower than in Western countries. Married priests are accepted in the Middle East while Catholic Christians in Asia are hesitant on this issue.

¹³ Cf. “Letter – Presidents Synodal Path Germany”, accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Materialien/HerderThemaEN-IT-DE-Letter-Presidents-SynodalPathGermany220829.pdf>.

¹⁴ Cf. “Final Document of the Amazon Synod”, accessed 21 May, 2025, <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

¹⁵ <https://iwm.sankt-georgen.de/en>.

¹⁶ Cf. Cerda-Planas, Kalbarczyk, Luber, 25-85. See also “Project »Synodal Way – World Church Perspectives«”, accessed 21 May, 2025, <https://iwm.sankt-georgen.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Publication-of-the-quantitative-results-Webpage-en-1.pdf>.

Most respondents agree that the Church should be intensely concerned with the issue of sexuality, yet their opinions about the Church's current teaching on sexuality, marriage, and homosexuality vary widely. While the role of women in parishes is well appreciated, the idea of admitting women to ordained ministries seems controversial. Less than half, but more than 40 per cent of respondents said that "In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church".

In summary, the survey shows a strong commitment to the themes of the "Synodal Path" in Germany. Most of the participants are positively inclined to strengthen the role and influence of the laity in the Church, in order to achieve a better distribution of power, which will make it possible to structure accountability within the Church, to foster credibility, to help in the proclamation of the Gospel, and to prevent any kind of abuse.

7. Unity and Plurality within the Church

Comparing these findings with the debates on the "Synodal Path" in Germany and the tensions between different groups in the Catholic Church that became evident during the global "Synodal Journey", a major challenge for the Church emerges: How to cope with plurality and diversity inside the Church? How to preserve unity while admitting different ways of pastoral practice in the dioceses and parishes? How to cope with opposing interpretations of the common faith when different cultural conditions and – consequently – different interpretations of the "signs of the times" are prevailing in the universal Church?¹⁷

Such questions could lead to an unprecedented appreciation of plurality within the Catholic Church. It is not a question of suppressing opposing views in the Church about the correct interpretation of the Gospel and its consequences for ecclesial practice. Rather, it is a matter of valuing diversity as an enrichment of the Church. The *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality clearly expresses such an appreciation.

Anyway, transparency of mutual exchange and dialogue within the Church is essential and should be fostered. At the global level, a culture of trust and confidence is needed – between dioceses and Rome, between dioceses within a given country, between countries on a given continent. And perhaps Catholics should be courageous enough to tolerate different practices within the one and only Church without fearing that its unity will be violated.

¹⁷ Cf. Margit Eckholt, "Loci theologici in times of synodality. Remarks on theological epistemology in intercultural perspectives", *Perspectiva Teológica* 56 / 3 (2024): 389-407.

The *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality speaks of different speeds of progress within the Church: “A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces. Differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and as an opportunity for sharing gifts and mutual enrichment. This common horizon requires discerning, identifying and promoting concrete practices which allow us to be a synodal Church on mission” (n. 124).

Perhaps, even in the light of Christian faith and Catholic tradition, the “signs of the times” look different in Germany, in France, in Argentina, in Nigeria, in Australia, and in Poland. Theology’s task then will be to draw appropriate conclusions from that in accordance with the Holy Scripture, the tradition, the magisterium, and the faith of the People of God. This would be a challenging task for theology today but at the same time an important service to the Gospel and the credibility of the Church. At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV during his homily on Saint Peter’s Square reminded that all baptised are called “to build God’s house in fraternal communion, in the harmony of the Spirit, in the coexistence of diversity.”¹⁸

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Interpreting the “Signs of the Times” as a Challenge to the Church’s Mission from a German Perspective

SUMMARY

The “Synodal Path” (*Synodaler Weg*) in Germany was understood from the outset as an appropriate response by the Catholic Church to the “signs of the times”. Triggered by the abuse crisis, institutional frameworks for individual misconduct were identified and proposals for reform were put forward, which aimed at preventing future abuse and serving the credibility of the Gospel. The article delineates the historical background of the “Synodal Path” in Germany and outlines the interpretation of the “signs of the times” by the delegates of the General Assembly. It situates the positions of the “Synodal Path” within the general debates on similar issues that are taking place within the Catholic Church on a global scale. The concluding remarks offer some theological challenges for further reflection on the “signs of the times”.

Keywords: “Synodal Path”, “signs of the times”, contextuality, “*loci theologici*”, synodality