

# Return to the spirit of the Acts of the Apostles

Address of Marc Cardinal Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, to the German Bishops during their *ad limina* visit on November 18, 2022.

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*The bishops of Germany and a number of heads of Vatican offices listen to Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, during a meeting Nov. 18, 2022, at the Augustinianum Institute for Patristic Studies. The German bishops were making their "ad limina" visits to Rome. Seated next to Cardinal Parolin is Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)*

**Editor's note:** The following address was translated by William J. Melcher for CWR, from **the Italian original** posted by *L'Osservatore Romano*, with reference to **the German translation** posted by kath.net.

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In his *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany* [dated June 29, 2019], Pope Francis, in communion with his predecessor Benedict XVI, noted the deterioration of Christian life in the country and invited all the people to entrust themselves to Christ as a key for renewal; the Holy Father wrote that it is “a multifaceted deterioration, not easy or quick to solve, which calls for a serious and well-informed approach that urges us to become, on the threshold of a new era, like the beggar in Acts, listening to the words of the Apostle: ‘I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, walk!’ (Acts 3:6).” I start again with this excerpt from the above mentioned letter so as to offer several brief ecclesiological considerations regarding your synodal investigation, in the spirit of the Acts of the Apostles. I do this as a brother in the episcopate, but also with a view to the needs of the lay faithful.

You, as successors of the apostles in Germany, took seriously the tragedy of sexual abuse committed by clerics, and, in a typically German way, launched a study campaign with the resources of [social] science, faith, and **synodal consultation, to arrive at a radical revision that was supposed to put an end to this moral and institutional failure.** The heated debates that have been conducted and the proposed reforms that resulted from them certainly deserve praise for the attention, commitment, creativity, sincerity, and the boldness manifested by your Synodal Way, in which lay people played an equal if not a predominant role. After attentive study of your conclusions, the reader naturally appreciates the gigantic effort of institutional self-criticism, as well as the time devoted to these reflections, and the investment of work in common by theologians, bishops, and pastors, men and women, to arrive at certain points of consensus, although laboriously and with considerable tensions. **It is up to us now to respond to your proposals, which contain many shareable elements of a theological, organizational, and pragmatic sort, yet raise serious difficulties from the anthropological, pastoral, and ecclesiological perspective.**

Several authoritative critics of **the current orientation of the Synodal Way in Germany speak openly about a latent schism which the proposal of your texts, in their present form, would run the risk of endorsing.** I know very well that it is not your intention to bring about a rupture with the universal communion of the Church, nor to promote a truncated form of Christian life more in keeping with the “spirit of the age” than with the Gospel; indeed, **the concessions that appear in your proposals were, so to speak, extorted from you by very strong pressure by the culture and the media;** I understand that your intention is precisely to avoid a schism by making the ministers of the Gospel more credible, more numerous, and better qualified, and by raising up Christian communities that are more inclusive and respectful of all attitudes, which must be evaluated in a way consistent with human dignity and the Christian concept of the human person. It is striking, however, that **the agenda of a limited group of theologians from a few decades ago has suddenly become the proposal of the majority of the German episcopate: the abolition of obligatory celibacy, the ordination of *virī probati* [proven married men], access for women to the ordained ministry, a moral reevaluation of homosexuality, structural and functional limitations on hierarchical authority, considerations about sexuality inspired by gender theory, the proposal of important changes to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, etc.**

“What happened?” “What have we come to?” many Catholic faithful and observers wonder in disbelief. It is difficult to avoid the impression that **the sexual abuse crisis, while extremely serious, was nevertheless exploited so as to promote other ideas that are not directly connected with it.**

**Evaluating the proposals as a whole, one gets the impression of confronting not only a more broad-minded interpretation of Catholic discipline or morality, but a fundamental change that raises serious concerns, as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith just said. It appears to us that we are facing a plan to “change the Church” and not just pastoral innovations in the area of morality or dogma.** Unfortunately, I must say that this global proposal, which has already been widely published in Germany and elsewhere, **wounds ecclesial communion, because it sows doubt and confusion**

**among the people of God.** Every day we receive unsolicited testimonies that lament the scandal given to the little ones by this unexpected proposal that breaks with Catholic Tradition.

It is no surprise that **these results are dividing not only the local Bishops' Conference and the Church in Germany, but also the worldwide episcopate,** which has not failed to react with amazement and concern. This fact should make us reflect about **the primary duty of bishops, which is to teach according to the Magisterium of the Church and of the Supreme Pontiff (see *Lumen gentium* 25).** Every bishop, from his consecration and admission to the college of the successors of the apostles, *cum et sub Petro* [with and under Peter], is qualified to represent the Universal Church in the particular part of it entrusted to him and to guarantee the communion of his part with the Universal Church. The criteria for this communion are listed in *Lumen gentium*, in *Christus Dominus*, and in the Code of Canon Law.

**The fact that the Letter composed by Pope Francis in June 2019 for the purpose of orientation was received as a spiritual reference point, but not really as a guide for the synodal method, has had important consequences. After this initial departure from papal teaching authority at the methodological level, the course of synodal proceedings has brought to light progressively increasing tension with the official Magisterium at the substantial level, leading to proposals that plainly contradict the teaching repeated by all the Popes from the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council onward. Astonishing in this regard is the attitude toward the definitive decision by Saint John Paul II about the inability of the Catholic Church to proceed to ordain women priests. This attitude reveals a problem of faith with respect to the Magisterium and a certain intrusive rationalism that does not comply with its decisions unless they seem personally convincing or are widely accepted by public opinion. This symbolic example, added to the other desired moral and disciplinary changes, undermines the bishops' responsibility for their primary ministry and casts a shadow on the whole above mentioned effort of the assembly, which appears to be strongly influenced by pressure groups, and hence is judged by many to**

**be a risky initiative doomed to disappoint and fail because it has “run off the rails.”**

Thank God, these completed texts—which have already been voted on, although they are still open to further modifications in the final session scheduled for March—also contain considerable progress in rethinking pastoral and ecclesiological problems, for example: a keen sense of justice and of the moral obligation to make reparation to victims of abuse, promotion of the universal priesthood of all baptized persons, an attitude of recognizing charisms. In view of the circumstances and the severe tensions that accompanied the sessions at the time of the voting, keeping in mind above all the current consultation for the universal Synod on Synodality, it seems to us that **a moratorium is necessary on the proposals that have been presented, along with a substantial revision that should be made at a later date, in light of the results of the Roman Synod.** Providentially, we have an opportunity to combine these two expectations by adopting a change of methodology that could help to improve the theses of the German Synodal Way, along the lines of listening more deeply to the approach of Pope Francis and of the worldwide Synod of Bishops. Obviously the methodology of the Universal Synod is different from the one used in German: certainly it is less parliamentary, more attentive to global participation and to arriving at consensus formed on the basis of profound spiritual listening to the people of God.

**The fundamental reason for this moratorium is concern for the unity of the Church, which is based on the unity of the bishops in communion with and in obedience to Peter. Supporting this controversial proposal of an episcopate that is experiencing difficulties would sow even more doubts and confusion among the people of God.** Keeping in mind the ecumenical scene and the geopolitical situation of a world convulsed by wars, it is foreseeable that **the further spread of this proposal would not resolve the problems that it is supposed to remedy: the massive departure of the faithful from the Church, the exodus of young people, the so-called “systemic causes” of abuse, the crisis of trust among the faithful.**

**The principle limitation of this proposal is perhaps a certain apologetic approach based on cultural changes instead of**

**relying on a renewed proclamation of the Gospel. You possess gold and silver, knowledge and widely acknowledged prestige, and you administer it all generously, but do not forget to testify forcefully and simply to the faith in Jesus Christ for which your people are begging.**

With the example and the teaching of Pope Francis we can return to the spirit of the Acts of the Apostles, offer above all else Jesus Christ to our people who need care and conversion, and not pretend that cultural or institutional solutions are indispensable in order to make the figure of Jesus believable, although it is proposed by ministers who are imperfect yet confident in God's grace and mercy. This is the initial message of Pope Francis which it is now necessary to repeat and to apply to the revision of the results of the Synodal Way.

*+Marc Cardinal Ouellet*

Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops