

THE SYNODAL TIMES



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

**AFRICAN CARDINAL:
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German bishops: Reform dialogue can continue

The German Catholic bishops and the ZDK, a representative body for the laity, want to continue their dialogue on reforms in the Church. After a meeting in Rome, they are encouraged in this by the Vatican.

Following recent talks in the Vatican, the German bishops and the Central Committee of German Catholics are looking forward with confidence to the continuation of the dialogue on reforms in the Church in Germany.

The way is now clear for further work in the Synodal Committee, write the Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Georg Bätzing, and ZdK President Irme Stetter-Karp to the members of the committee. The letter is available to the Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur (KNA).

The Synodal Committee has only met once so far. The second meeting is planned for mid-June in Mainz. However, the bishops have yet to approve the committee's statutes. According to the letter, the bishops want to make up for this at the meeting of their Permanent Council on 22 April. The financial resources for the committee's work are to be channelled through an association, the foundation of which is apparently



Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, addresses Pope Francis November 17, 2022, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace during the bishops' *ad limina* visits to the Vatican. Photo: CNS/Vatican Media

planned before Easter.

The Synodal Committee is a result of the Synodal Path for the Future of the Catholic Church in Germany, which was launched by bishops and laypeople in 2019. Among other things, it is to prepare the establishment of

a Synodal Council in which bishops and laypeople can jointly discuss and decide on important internal church issues in Germany. The Vatican had repeatedly rejected this because it recognised a possible violation of canon law and the doctrine of the

Church as a hierarchy in which the bishops and the Pope have ultimate responsibility.

During their exchange with high-ranking Vatican representatives last Friday in the Vatican, the delegation from the Bishops' Con-

ference was able to make it clear that the exact organisation of the Synodal Council had not yet been discussed.

"And they have assured the representatives of the Curia that they will ensure that the proposal complies with the Church's guide-

lines," the current letter states. "In addition to further discussions to deepen the dialogue, it has also been agreed that there will be feedback with the Curia during the further process of the Synodal Council's conception."

NEXT WEEK: WELCOMING THE SPIRIT THIS SYNOD

Turning cartwheels



Penelope Middelboe

"She's been seen turning cartwheels!"

"What? in her habit!?"

"How do you do that?"

"How do you know?"

"S'Mary Peter saw her."

"She told you?"

"She told S'Mary Paul," Karen said.

We nodded. Everyone knew Karen was a favourite of Sr Mary Paul."

"Sr Mary Peter said she didn't even seem to notice she'd done a cartwheel."

Not *The Sound of Music*, just the start of an Autumn term, at the top of a haybarn on a boarding school farm in England. The bales, being newly stacked, almost reached the top so there was little chance of being spotted should Farmer Giles (I kid you not) be walking by. Unless he smelt our cigarettes.

The person turning cartwheels of spiritual ecstasy was Virginia White (her name has been changed) who'd been at school with us and was just three years older. Since the long summer holidays when she'd taken her first vow to become a nun - or a postulant - none of us had seen her. We'd heard she'd have to stay in the nuns-only part of the school for a year. They had a secret garden but the walls were far too high to climb and peer over.

We'd probably all had a crush on dark, boyish, Virginia, at some time or other. Mine had started two years before, after she became county fencing champion but before she became head girl. I was 13 and she 16. She had been St Joan in George Bernard Shaw's play and I'd been prepared to fight with her to the death. Virginia being literally head-over-heels in love with Jesus scared me. I wanted so much to be like her. And yet I didn't.

That evening, with a friend, I hatched a plan to ensure I could not be 'called'. I dared myself to trample on the school rhubarb patch. In the end I trampled on just a few. It's harder than you imagine to destroy healthy plants. And I diluted my 'sin' yet further when, later, I felt obliged to own up once the crime had been discovered.

Dwindling

The majority of teaching nuns at my school were in their early 30s and 40s. They'd joined post-Vatican Two. Strong, attractive, educated young women, with very distinct personalities.

They wore the full habit, with only their hands and faces showing.



Dominican Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart smiles as she hugs Sister Maria Aquinas following Mass at Corpus Christi Monastery in the Bronx, New York on March 7. Photo: OSV News Gregory A. Shemitz

For most of the year they were our role models. The terrifyingly strict choir mistress had a motto: 'One hour you give to God (meaning her choir) will be given back to you two-fold.'

“In Africa and Asia young women still choose the religious life to minister to the sick and the poor”

I don't know what happened to Virginia White. Some of the most characterful nuns left not long after I finished at the school, in the mid '70s. They 'jumped over the wall' as we used to say. 30 years later, the remainder turned the school over to a trust, left the beautiful palace with its cedar trees and avenue that had been given to Anne Boleyn, and escaped the snobbish parents and girls to live in tiny houses in two nearby towns, where they still work with the poorest communities.

They mind the babies and children they never had, support the exhausted parents struggling with zero-hours contracts, and nurture the elderly. The only habits they have these days are following the monastic Rule of St Augustine.

'My' nuns, like most in both Catholic and Anglican communities in the West, are now aging. I can only find one nun on the list of staff of a Catholic boarding school in the UK today. It was more than 20 years ago, at the first international conference in Dublin for Women's Ordination Worldwide, that my friend Sr Myra Poole of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur bravely defied the Vatican to attend as a keynote speaker.

Today she's house-bound. Sr Joan Chittister, from the Benedictine Sis-

ters of Erie, Pennsylvania, also spoke that day, with the full support of her congregation. Joan, who memorably said, "the prophet is the person who says no to everything that is not of God," remains as vibrant as ever. But she is 88.

There are of course plenty of selfless young women teachers, health care professionals, social workers, NGOs, and charity workers working for the Kingdom of God on earth. But if you're talking of nuns, eighty is now the average age in Ireland as well as in the USA - where only 1% are under 40.

They are what remains of the post-Vatican II peak in novitiates. Do those seeking Christian ecstasy these days, without the agony of self-denial, perhaps turn to evangelicalism?

In Africa and Asia young women still choose the religious life to minister to the sick and the poor. But many, as has been the case worldwide through the centuries, are escaping poverty or early marriages, or taking the only available route to education.

Calling

My heart breaks when I hear Sr Dr Anita Chettiar in India and Sr Dr Nazreen Daniel in Pakistan, both older nuns, tell me how they make a point of warning postulants that they will inevitably be targeted sexually by male clerics. What makes it

worse is that they know that there is no functioning safeguarding for these vulnerable women. All they can tell them is that there's one justice for the woman and another for the man.

Dr Kochurani Abraham in Southern India, in a move that undoubtedly put her reputation on the line, left the convent religious life so that she could be free to campaign for justice for her religious sisters - specifically justice in cases of sexual and spiritual clerical abuse.

When I ask her if she'll marry now, she is surprised. Her devotion to God has not changed. She's simply left the establishment, "happy to live my consecration in the cloister of the world". In Brazil, a Christian eco-warrior friend, Binkale Breton, has researched the contemporary stories of martyred nuns and priests.

In the brutal world of the Amazon they defend workers' rights and fight against the exploitation of the land, and they pay the ultimate price. One of these, an American, Dorothy Stang, was a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur like Myra.

Two youngish nuns I've had the privilege to meet in the UK are part of a small order, started by Margaret Anna Cusack a Poor Clare activist from Ireland in the 19th Century. She achieved notoriety writing under the name 'The Nun of Kenmare'.

“Many, as has been the case worldwide through the centuries, are escaping poverty or early marriages, or taking the only available route to education”

The charism of the Sisters of St Joseph of Peace is peace through justice. Their non-violent direct action might involve for example prayerfully blocking arms dealers from reaching the biennial government-sponsored arms fair in London and being arrested.

Back in 2021 Sr Katrina Alton, originally from the north of Ireland and now in community in England, said it all starts with prayer. 'The first act of resistance is prayer, when you pray "Your Kingdom Come".' Recently she told me that today she would rephrase this to say "prayer is resistance and resistance is prayer."

“It takes a rare woman to become a nun. They seem to have so much to lose and so little to gain”

I can see now that what I thought, at the age of 15, was my 'vocation' was simply hormones. It takes a rare woman to become a nun. They seem to have so much to lose and so little to gain. A seminarian can look forward to independence, status, and power from the moment he becomes a parish priest. There's a career-path too, should he be so inclined.

The nuns I know and admire will never have any status or voting power within the hierarchy. They do however have a very strong voice. And I believe they have gained much more than status.

With their daily, small acts of white martyrdom, they live out Jesus' beatitudinal mission. Perhaps their sacrifices are after all restored to them two-fold. Through them we hear Jesus's voice.