



**Letter by Bishop Bätzing in response to
the letter by Archbishop Gadecki,
President of the Polish Bishops' Conference, on the
Synodal Path**

We document the reply written by Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing, President of the German Bishops' Conference, on 16 March 2022 to Archbishop Dr Stanisław Gądecki, President of the Polish Bishops' Conference:

Your Excellency, dear Archbishop,

I was pleased to visit you in Poznan on 30 November last year to continue the positive dialogue between our predecessors and the Church in our countries. On this occasion, we were able to exchange views on the ecclesiastical and social situation in Poland and Germany, including – and this was a particular concern of mine – on the Synodal Path, which we as the German Bishops' Conference are supporting together with the Central Committee of German Catholics. We have agreed that questions arising in connection with the Synodal Path should be discussed in the permanent contact group of both our Bishops' Conferences. I understand that it has already been arranged that the contact group will take on this task in April of this year. I think that this joint day in Poznan and also the envisaged procedure was a good example of confraternal dialogue and synodal exchange in the universal Church, which Pope Francis promotes so much in his pontificate. This was shown not least by our joint appearance before the Polish press.

I do not want to hide the fact that, in view of this history, I was irritated that your letter of 22 February 2022 addressed to me was already available on various websites at the same time as I received it, including on the official homepage of the Polish Bishops' Conference. In my opinion it would be better if letters between us were not made public, but served as a genuine means of exchange between us. I would like to respond to the questions you raised as follows:

You write that it is our task as bishops to “find effective ways to bring people to conversion”. As right as this is, however, we must also look at ourselves first when Jesus told us: “Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye.” (*Matthew 7:5*) With this in mind, following the publication of the MHG study on sexual abuse of minors (2018) commissioned by the German Bishops' Conference, we German bishops unanimously decided to embark on a Synodal Path to look at and deal with the systemic causes of sexualised violence in the sphere of the Church and its cover-up. The fact that in this context, with the topics of power, the priestly way of life, the role of women and sexual morality, questions also come into focus that have been discussed for a long time, does not make these topics less important, but shows their urgency. For us, it is very important to take the cases of abuse, which you do not mention in your letter, as a starting point. Only if we address the systemic causes of the unspeakable suffering brought upon people by representatives of the Church, mostly priests, will it be possible at all to reopen the space in which a proclamation of the Gospel meets with open ears. Yes, only in this way will we gain new credibility and new trust, among the public and the faithful, which we have squandered. In this sense, the Synodal Path is a “path of conversion and renewal”, as it says in its statutes, a path that also allows us to learn anew while we are walking. Here too, an exchange seems helpful to me. I would like to learn from you how you address the systemic causes of the thousands of cases of abuse that we have to deal with here in Germany, in Poland, but also worldwide.

We do not walk the path of conversion and renewal carelessly and certainly not outside the universal Church. Several times I was able to speak about the Synodal Path with Pope Francis. Above all, however, we are walking the Synodal Path, as Pope Francis expressly urged us to do in his letter to the pilgrim people of God in Germany, not only as a search “for a frank response to the present situation”, but as a spiritual path requesting guidance from the Holy Spirit. While doing so we are constantly looking for the next, hopefully right step. The theological foundations on which the Synodal Path is based in its work, and that means above all in the theological argumentation of its texts, are explained in detail in the orientation text “On the Path of Conversion and Renewal”, which has already been adopted by the Synodal Assembly. In this, it becomes clear that the Synodal Path is by no means simply dependent on current developments in psychology and the social sciences, but rather that Holy Scripture is the highest guideline. Alongside this, living tradition, the signs of the times emphasized by the Second Vatican Council, the sense of faith of the faithful, the Magisterium and theology are fundamental in mutual interconnectedness.

Since you mention the titles of the texts available so far, but do not comment on their theological argumentation, I assume that up to now you have not received the complete texts, also since these partly deal with older documents cited by you. I therefore take the liberty of enclosing the above-mentioned orientation text as well as the basic text “Power and separation of powers in the Church – joint participation and involvement in the mission”, which has also already been adopted, the adopted action text “Involvement of the faithful in the appointment of the diocesan bishop” as well as all other texts dealt with in the first reading but not yet adopted, in German

and in an English working translation. All texts are also published at www.synodalerweg.de, where further translations will also be offered in the future.

I would be interested in a genuine theological exchange with you about the argumentation of these texts, since they try to pave ways to make evangelization possible. This must be our common concern.

During the penitential season of Lent we may look at this together. Despite all guilt, entanglements and faultiness, the Church has a great message to proclaim, but one that must not make her arrogant: the message of our Lord who allowed Himself to be crucified in order to save the world.

Please pray for the Church in Germany and for our journey of conversion and renewal.

With fraternal greetings

Yours sincerely

Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing