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Herbert Haag Stiftung
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Open letter

to Pope Francis for the World Synod of Bishops 2024

Genuine synodality: addressing women's priesthood at the World Synod

Dear Brother Francis,

"Why can't a woman become pope?" asks a girl preparing for her first Holy Communion. The catechist refers to the tradition of the Church and its teachings in child-friendly terms. "Then the Church is discriminating against women," is the spontaneous response of another member of the communion group.

This is an everyday situation in many European countries and among many other "Christian peoples" (Pacem in terris No. 22). The question is not only asked by children, but by many adult Catholics. It should be taken seriously by the Church. At least in a world synod that has set itself the goal of "listening". After all, the question does not arise from a spirit of hostility, but from love of faith and love of the Church.

Ignoring the question means excluding from synodality the possibility of articulating the *sensus fidei of the* clergy and faithful of great cultures. This is what we are opposing with this Open Letter.

We know: The Roman Catholic Church is facing major challenges and problems. The world is in upheaval and our church must face up to this development - without losing its core faith.

This has led to fierce controversy in the church for several years now. In many regional churches as well as in the universal church, these controversies have caused wounds. To heal the wounds, there is only one solution: practised *communion* in lively and open dialogue. The World Synod 2021 - 2024 is rightly creating space for this.

Healing will only succeed if the World Synod also takes up an urgent and important issue such as the admission of women to the priesthood.

Like you, Brother Francis, we are of the opinion "that we are not only living in a time of change, but rather in a turning point that raises new and old questions, in the face of which a debate is justified and necessary" (Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany, 29 June 2019).

With this proposal for the World Synod, we would like to follow you on a path that "encourages us to seek a frank response to the current situation" (ibid.). Allow us to make the following remarks in support of our proposal.

1. the priesthood of women - a topical Catholic issue

Since the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, the priesthood of women has been on the church and social agenda. With the first public ordination of women by the "Danube Seven", which took place in 2002 in violation of church law, a development began from which around 300 women priests have emerged *contra legem* to date. The activities (church leadership in Amazonia, among other places) and testimonies (see Philippa Rath, *Weil Gott es so will*) of many women testify to their vocation to the priesthood.

This development is flanked by a large number of organisations that campaign for the ordination of women. "We are Church" and official Catholic lay organisations are just the high-profile tip of this iceberg in Europe. There are many similar initiatives around the world debating the issue - even if they are often less audible than in Europe and the USA.

Bishops also consider this topic to be relevant. In 2022, for example, the Roman Catholic missionary bishop Erwin Kräutler CPPS emphatically emphasised the need for women's ordination (Newspaper of German Jesuits "Stimmen der Zeit", March 2022, p.163-169). He also did so with regard to the vocation of his (now deceased) biological sister Ermelinde, who

had already been a pastoral assistant in Austria for many years. "She asked me again and again," writes Bishop Kräutler: "*Why, for God's sake, am I excluded from ordination to the priesthood? Just because I am a woman?*" - "She is dead now, but her question is still burning in my heart ... Why are women not allowed to be ordained? To this day, I haven't found an answer that could convince me. And I know there is no really convincing answer".

2. Ordinatio sacerdotalis: no reason for silence

When Pope John Paul II emphatically rejected the ordination of women in his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis in* 1994, he concluded by declaring "that the Church has no authority to ordain women to the priesthood and that all the faithful of the Church must definitively abide by this decision" (OS no. 4).

Of course, "definitive" only means until the doctrinal view changes, which is known to happen time and again. Such changes in doctrine are not only real, but also important, as they transform the signs of the times into church doctrine and a living faith. The current doctrine is also the result of such changes.

Before that, every Christian is not only allowed but also encouraged to contribute to these changes. This can be done through personal reflection, but also through public discussion. Anyone who loyally works towards a change in doctrine is observing the Church's teaching and is not acting contrary to it. Anyone who speaks openly about the priesthood of women or approves of it is not speaking *de doctrina lata*, but *de doctrina ferenda*, not about current doctrine, but about future doctrine. He follows the Church's teaching, even if he expresses doubts about it.

3. "Listening to the Holy Scriptures"

Popes come and go. Only the Bible remains. But what does the Bible say about the ordination of women? The views on this are controversial. But the Bible is by no means as hostile as the Church makes it seem.

The highest authority on biblical interpretation, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, found as early as 1976 that the New Testament does not make a decision on the ordination of women to the priesthood and therefore no prohibition of women priests can be deduced from New Testament statements; nor is Christ's plan of salvation exceeded or distorted by allowing the ordination of women.

The Vatican preparatory document for the World Synod "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission" rightly focuses on "listening to the Holy Scriptures" (Chapter III) as a central element of a synodal church. It calls for "listening to the Spirit together" and refers to Jesus:

"In a way that surprises the witnesses ..., Jesus accepts as interlocutors all those who come out of the crowd: he listens to the passionate objections of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-

28), who cannot accept being excluded from the blessing He brings" (Preparatory Document p. 13).

4. Synodality in action: "Speak freely and openly"

A synodal church "walks together" and therefore invites everyone to "speak with courage and boldness" (preparatory document p. 20). This is not a matter of course in the Roman Catholic Church today. In many places it is not possible because the freedom to do so is suppressed within the Church.

In European countries, freedom of expression has become much easier in recent times. Anyone who declares the debate on the ordination of women to be normative today, for example, belongs to a minority within the Church. Those who try to stop it encounter powerful resistance from within the church, society and the law. He is hardly taken seriously - even as a pastor - because by refusing to engage in debate he discredits Christian values (see *Pacem in terris* No. 7) and thus accelerates the decline of the Church.

This is different in many countries, especially outside of Europe. Anyone who speaks openly about the priesthood of women there, or even considers it desirable in the future, must fear sanctions such as the withdrawal of the *missio* or other restrictions under labour and ministry law. Such sanctions within the Church for freely expressing opinions about the future teaching of the Church are absolutely unacceptable. They must stop at all costs.

The World Synod should set a good example by holding an open debate on the priesthood of women. In doing so, the Church would be actively defending Christian values that continue to be grossly disregarded by some bishops in many countries.

5. proposal for the World Synod

In deep concern for the credibility and the future of the Catholic Church in our countries, and in a sense of co-responsibility for the healing of the wounds caused by silence and rejection, we consider it urgent and important to enable and officially provide for the debate on the priesthood of women in the Roman Catholic Church at the World Synod 2024 - a debate that is

- open to everyone - lay and clergy,
- open for all contents and
- open to all results.

The time is ripe. A world synod that does not open up to a debate on the topic of women's priesthood in our church today would have missed its own target.

We wish the church the courage to recognise the signs of the times and to enter into a healing exchange together - in other words, to be truly synodal.

Respectfully united in Christ

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