

## A FRATERNAL OPEN LETTER TO OUR BROTHER BISHOPS IN GERMANY

April 11, 2022

In an age of rapid global communication, events in one nation inevitably impact ecclesial life elsewhere. Thus the “Synodal Path” process, as currently pursued by Catholics in Germany, has implications for the Church worldwide. This includes the local Churches which we pastor and the many faithful Catholics for whom we are responsible.

In that light, events in Germany compel us to express our growing concern about the nature of the entire German “Synodal Path” process and the content of its various documents. Our comments here are deliberately brief. They warrant, and we strongly encourage, more elaboration (as, for example, Archbishop Samuel Aquila’s An Open Letter to the Catholic Bishops of the World) from individual bishops. Nonetheless, the urgency of our joint remarks is rooted in Romans 12, and especially Paul’s caution: Do not be conformed to this world. And their seriousness flows from the confusion that the Synodal Path has already caused and continues to cause, and the potential for schism in the life of the Church that will inevitably result.

The need for reform and renewal is as old as the Church herself. At its root, this impulse is admirable and should never be feared. Many of those involved in the Synodal Path process are doubtless people of outstanding character. Yet Christian history is littered with well-intended efforts that lost their grounding in the Word of God, in a faithful encounter with Jesus Christ, in a true listening to the Holy Spirit, and in the submission of our wills to the will of the Father. These failed efforts ignored the unity, experience, and accumulated wisdom of the Gospel and the Church. Because they failed to heed the words of Jesus, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15: 5), they were fruitless and damaged both the unity and the evangelical vitality of the Church. Germany’s Synodal Path risks leading to precisely such a dead end.

As your brother bishops, our concerns include but are not limited to the following:

1. Failing to listen to the Holy Spirit and the Gospel, the Synodal Path's actions undermine the credibility of Church authority, including that of Pope Francis; Christian anthropology and sexual morality; and the reliability of Scripture.

2. While they display a patina of religious ideas and vocabulary, the German Synodal Path documents seem largely inspired not by Scripture and Tradition – which, for the Second Vatican Council, are "a single sacred deposit of the Word of God" – but by sociological analysis and contemporary political, including gender, ideologies. They look at the Church and her mission through the lens of the world rather than through the lens of the truths revealed in Scripture and the Church's authoritative Tradition.

3. Synodal Path content also seems to reinterpret, and thus diminish, the meaning of Christian freedom. For the Christian, freedom is the knowledge, the willingness, and the unhampered ability to do what is right. Freedom is not "autonomy." Authentic freedom, as the Church teaches, is tethered to truth and ordered to goodness and, ultimately, beatitude. Conscience does not create truth, nor is conscience a matter of personal preference or self-assertion. A properly formed Christian conscience remains subject to the truth about human nature and the norms of righteous living revealed by God and taught by Christ's Church. Jesus is the truth, who sets us free (Jn 8).

4. The joy of the Gospel – essential to Christian life, as Pope Francis so often stresses – seems utterly absent from Synodal Path discussions and texts, a telling flaw for an effort that seeks personal and ecclesial renewal.

5. The Synodal Path process, at nearly every step, is the work of experts and committees: bureaucracy-heavy, obsessively critical, and inward-looking. It thus itself reflects a widespread form of Church sclerosis and, ironically, becomes anti-evangelical in tone. In its effect, the Synodal Path displays more submission

and obedience to the world and ideologies than to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

6. The Synodal Path's focus on "power" in the Church suggests a spirit fundamentally at odds with the real nature of Christian life. Ultimately the Church is not merely an "institution" but an organic community; not egalitarian but familial, complementary, and hierarchical — a people sealed together by love of Jesus Christ and love for each other in his name. The reform of structures is not at all the same thing as the conversion of hearts. The encounter with Jesus, as seen in the Gospel and in the lives of the saints throughout history, changes hearts and minds, brings healing, turns one away from a life of sin and unhappiness, and demonstrates the power of the Gospel.

7. The last and most distressingly immediate problem with Germany's Synodal Path is terribly ironic. By its destructive example, it may lead some bishops, and will lead many otherwise faithful laypeople, to distrust the very idea of "synodality," thus further impeding the Church's necessary conversation about fulfilling the mission of converting and sanctifying the world.

In a time of confusion, the last thing our community of faith needs is more of the same. As you discern the Lord's will for the Church in Germany, be assured of our prayers for you.

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Cardinal Raymond Burke (archbishop emeritus of St. Louis, Missouri, USA)

Cardinal Wilfred Napier (archbishop emeritus of Durban, South Africa)

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Archbishop Damian Dallu (Songea, Tanzania)

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Bishop Rogatus Kimaryo (Same, Tanzania)  
Bishop Anthony Lagwen (Mbulu, Tanzania)

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Bishop Gregory Mansour (Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn, New York, USA)  
Bishop Simon Masondole (Bunda, Tanzania)  
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Bishop Filbert Mhasi (Tunduru-Masasi, Tanzania)  
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