

## **Church Without Clergy**

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Translated by Colm Holmes

There are situations in which history overtakes itself and developments unfold a dynamic that was hardly conceivable a short time ago. This is shown by the current discussion on the role of the priest in the Catholic Church, which has broken out on a large stage.

It is less than two years ago that I put forward a cautious conditional thesis on this topic in this magazine: "If the Church is not in a position to adapt the image of the priest to today's requirements and convictions and thus to provide the faithful with sufficiently good priests, an alternative path could be to train a Church that no longer needs clergy, but only more pastors (women & men) who understand people's lives".

What was intended by me at the time as a critical but constructive approach was understood by some as a brutal affront to the priesthood. Some priests felt their identity had been shaken or their ego attacked. A priest who used to be a friend of mine even took pains to call the bishop on to me right away. Obviously, this formulation smelled of heresy and a bishop's word of power would easily make me "Catholic" again.

It may be that my formulation not only surprised but also overwhelmed some people. I myself grew up with an image of the church in which priests played an important role as a matter of course: There were priests in the parish, in my Catholic school as well, even the boarding school was run by priests, and there were also priests among the professors at university. There were also priests in my circle of friends. There were good people among them and I am still very grateful to some of them for having accompanied me in my life.

But I have also experienced the changes of time: Fewer and fewer theology students go into the seminary for priests and more and more often outstanding theologians and gifted pastoral workers were also to be found in the so-called laity.

And finally, in pastoral work, I myself experienced that the classic priest was often replaced by someone who is filled with faith and accompanies people with quality pastoral care, but without being a priest, either because he lacks the Y-chromosome or the willingness to be unmarried and family-less. If people now experience – and they do – that these pastors are valuable companions on their journey of faith and life, and if at the same time there is a lack of priests who could also fill this role – which is largely and increasingly the case, the Church today suffers not only from a lack of priests, but also from the failings of priests – then it is clear what we are heading towards: a Church in which at some point no one will ask for a priest any more.

Is this thesis or this finding really a sacrilege, an attack on the sacramental constitution of the Church? A thought that is possibly not even allowed to be thought because it is "impossible for the Church to think"? This remains to be discussed, both theologically and pastorally. "We Are Church" will gladly participate in this discourse. But even if no one wants to discuss it with us and even if my bishop wanted to forbid me to speak (which he has kindly not done so far), the topic would not simply disappear again. For it has long been there, unspoken, in its full breadth.

And in the German Church, it was recently officially called by its name: By a margin of admittedly only one vote (95:94), the members of the Synodal Way decided this September to put the question of whether the Church needs priests at all on the official list of topics of the German Synodal Way! It will be interesting to see what this discussion will bring to light and how far it will find its way into the larger Synodal Way, which is the task of the world church for the next few years.

Not surprisingly, this decision of the German Synodal way has also met with scepticism and rejection. It is regrettable that the chairman of the Austrian Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Franz Lackner, has now joined the ranks of the critics, rejecting the discussion of the above-mentioned question because it allegedly harbours the danger of a split. Sweeping something under the carpet and forbidding discussion has never worked, as the Church should have learned from John Paul II's Instruction "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis", which in 1994 summarily declared an end to the discussion on opening the ordained ministry to women by virtue of the papal office. Today, we are discussing it with more commitment than ever.

But the effects of a mentality that wants to sweep unpopular topics under the carpet, in the deceptive assumption that what is not visible is also non-existent, are fatal: when such a mentality begins to dominate a system, this means nothing other than that at some point this system no longer correlates with reality (in the language of the Church: no longer recognises the signs of the times).

The very question of the role of women in the church and, accordingly, of the admission of women to ordained ministry, which has been postponed for so long, shows where this leads. Admittedly, the drama is only being recognised by some in small steps. Thus the German Curia Cardinal Walter Kasper recently rather downplayed with regard to the equal rights of women in the Church: "We overslept quite a bit".

One would be tempted to ask how such oversleeping could have happened: Were half a million signatures in 1995 for the church referendum in Austria alone not enough of a wake-up call? Or the thousands upon thousands of people who leave the church year after year, at least some of whom can be traced back to the corresponding culture of refusal on the part of the church leadership? Or the profound theologies of Hans Küng, Eugen Drewermann, etc., who sought to open up new horizons for the church? Or – if one thinks one has to close oneself off to voices "from outside" – should one not at least have taken seriously the critical opinion of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the letter "Inter insigniores", when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith opposed the admission of women to the ordained ministry in the Anglican Church in 1976, and even the Pontifical Biblical Commission attested its problematic argumentation?! Were all these too few, too quiet wake-up calls?

Perhaps the Church is now becoming more alert. In Rome, the Synodal Way of Germany is being observed with concern, but also with attention. The urgency of the questions is at least being perceived more clearly than before. Archbishop Lackner also confirms that violations of the women's issue must be taken seriously and that he will take the issue to the Pope ("without representing everything himself"); Cardinal Kasper admits that the question of women's ordination, which is there, cannot simply be banned. And the Amazon Synod two years ago, among other things, put the women's question on the table in a new openness (even if the necessary consequences have not been drawn from it for a long time).

At present, therefore, the question is more than ever whether we are prepared to discuss questions such as the fundamental importance of priests, but also the conditions for admission to the

priesthood in the spirit of genuine synodality to discuss openly, to listen to each other in an appreciative way and to wrestle with each other for answers in an unbiased way. Pope Francis would often say that it is a matter of giving the Holy Spirit a chance. This probably also includes seeing the signs of the times.

However, in the event that we want to avoid all of this again and try to prolong the dithering of the last decades, I will once again put forward my thesis: If the Church is not in a position to adapt the image of the priest to today's requirements and convictions, and thus to provide the faithful with sufficient good priests, an alternative path could be to form a Church that no longer needs clerics, but only pastors who understand people's lives. I am unsure whether this announcement is a warning or a hope.

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