

# "I am impressed with the patience of the Pope"

An interview with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn

Controversy over the "Synodal Committee": For the Viennese Cardinal, the situation in the neighboring country is very serious. A letter from the highest-ranking Curia Cardinals to the Bishops in Germany warns them not to "present the Pope with a fait accompli" by finalizing decisions again. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn says: "A core aspect of the constitution of the Catholic Church is at stake."

Von Jan-Heiner Tück, Christoph Schönborn



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**J**an-Heiner Tück: *Following a series of Roman interventions, the German bishops have just received a letter from Rome asking them to refrain from approving the statutes of the planned Synodal Committee at their forthcoming plenary assembly. Is this a centralist intervention?*

**Cardinal Christoph Schönborn:** No, this is not a question of power. Rather, Pope Francis is carrying out his core task of preserving unity in the faith. From the very beginning, the Pope's critical observation of the German synodal path has been borne out of concern for the faith. The growing tensions are not an expression of a conflict between "Rome and Germany", but rather about the basic understanding of the Church. After all, the Pope's first task is to teach and protect the faith of the Church. The concern that the Pope and his colleagues in the Roman dicasteries have repeatedly expressed is primarily a concern about the correct understanding of the Church. And this is not about the power of the Roman headquarter against the power of the local Churches, but about unity in the faith, which is the primary ministry of the Petrine office.

**Tück:** *The noises in the communication between Rome and Germany have become louder and louder. The letter prohibiting the German bishops from voting on the statutes of the Synodal Committee is the climax of Roman interventions.*

**Schönborn:** This is not primarily about disciplinary issues, but about the understanding of the Church and Apostolic Ministry. In his letter to the Church in Germany from 2019, Pope Francis emphasized the "primacy of evangelization", because he sees this as the primary task of the Church. All the baptized are active agents of evangelization. The complete absence of the topic of evangelization in the German Synodal Path therefore makes me wonder about the image of the Church that is expressed here. It gives the impression that the Pope's concerns are simply not being taken up. The important impulses of the Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" from 2013 simply seem to me to be missing. Never before in the long history of the Church has the Church spoken so extensively and clearly about itself as it has at the Second Vatican Council. Here, too, it is about the renewal of the Church in service to the world. The criticism from Rome ultimately refers to the deficits in the reception of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

**Tück:** *However, key proponents of the German Synodal Path understand the Synodal Path as a creative continuation of the Council's ecclesiology..*

**Schönborn:** This is exactly not how Rome sees it. The Council has developed an understanding of the Bishop, which is ultimately based on the foundation through Christ (cf. Lumen Gentium Ch. 3), which is not based on the skillful balancing of power relations. The office of the Bishop stands in continuity of the apostolic proclamation and is endowed with an authority that is given through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It is therefore unacceptable for mixed committees and their majority votes to determine the future fate of the Church. This is the task of the Bishops as sacramentally commissioned witnesses of the faith. As a Bishop with many years of experience, I am, of course, aware that the sacramental commissioning is something culturally resistant; it is a dimension that radiates into the day-to-day business that cannot be derived from the political power relations that exist in today's society.

"The German bishops must seriously ask themselves whether they really want to leave the communion with and under the Pope or whether they do not rather want to accept it loyally."

**Tück:** *What authoritative weight does the latest letter from the Vatican have? According to the letter, its content was brought to the attention of the Holy Father and was approved by him.*

**Schönborn:** You have to acknowledge it clearly: The Pope's repeated requests are not simply contributions to a discussion on synodality; these statements - and above all the letter to the German bishops that has now been made public - are about the full weight of the episcopal office *cum et sub Petro*. This affects a core aspect of the constitution of the Catholic Church. The German bishops must therefore seriously ask themselves whether they really want to leave the communion with and under the Pope or rather accept it loyally. Refusing to give in would be *obstinatio* - a clear sign of a schism that nobody can want. Moreover, the timing of the letter immediately after the spring plenary assembly is remarkable. Is it a coincidence that the publication of the letter coincides with the beginning of Lent, which is a time of reflection and conversion?

**Tück:** *The Synodal Committee aims to prepare the establishment of a Synodal Council. The letter recalls a Vatican letter from January 16th, 2023, in which "expressly and by special mandate of the Holy Father" it was requested "not to pursue the establishment of such a council any further". However, supporters of the Synodal Council have repeatedly asserted that Dogma and Canon Law would not be affected by such a body. At the same time, however, the Synodal Council should not only function as an advisory body, but also as a decision-making body. Is this possible?*

**Schönborn:** Here I can only say, please, study the Second Vatican Council thoroughly! We have this Council - in continuity with the great doctrinal tradition of the Church - to guide us in the questions at issue here. Both the Dogma and the constitution of the Synodal Council are affected, because the understanding of the Bishop as an executive organ of synodal majority decisions is not compatible with that of the Council. The statements from Rome have repeatedly and emphatically reminded us that the Synodal Council is also incompatible with current Canon Law. It would be negligent to ignore this.

"The bishop cannot delegate the personal responsibility of passing on the faith to committees. Therefore, the concept of a bishops' voluntary commitment to the decisions of synodal councils is also incompatible with the core of the episcopal mission."

**Tück:** *The situation for the majority of German bishops is dramatic. On the one hand, they have promised the Central Committee of German Catholics that they want to continue with the Synodal Path. On the other hand, Pope Francis is now denying them the institutional consolidation of the Synodal Path that they had envisaged. A conflict of loyalties?*

**Schönborn:** I can empathize with the difficult situation of such a conflict of loyalties. We Bishops often experience this when we try to reconcile the concerns of the local Church with those of Rome. Nevertheless, we should remember that the positions of the Central Committee of German Catholics are not simply the expression of the faith of the people of God. Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us of the Council's teaching on the

infallibility of the people of God in matters of faith. The question of determining what *sensus fidei* is in terms of content cannot be answered univocally; the sense of faith of the people of God cannot be surveyed by opinion polls. The bishop cannot delegate the personal responsibility of passing on the faith to committees. Therefore, the figure of the bishops' voluntary commitment to the decisions of synodal councils is also incompatible with the core of the episcopal mission.

**Tück:** *The President of the Central Committee of German Catholics, Irme Stetter-Karp, is calling for the Synodal Committee to be "fully operational" at its next meeting in June. Vice President Thomas Söding urges the Bishops, who voted by a large majority in favor of establishing the Synodal Committee, to remain true to their own voting. Does Germany now has a "call to disobedience"?*

**Schönborn:** I hope not. Thomas Söding rightly reminded us that the German reform efforts cannot achieve their goal without a "Roman seal of approval". I assume that he will maintain this position even after the latest letter from Rome.

"I do not wish the Catholic Church in Germany the same fate of the Old-Catholic Church."

**Tück:** *The Protestant theologian Ulrich Körtner has written, as an observer, that the concerns of the Synodal Path would lead to an Old-Catholic Church 2.0. Would you share this assessment?*

**Schönborn:** Yes, I can only fully agree with this assessment. And I would like to add: I do not wish the Catholic Church in Germany the same fate of the Old-Catholic Church.

**Tück:** *On several occasions, you have successfully mediated in deadlocked discussions and contributed to a workable compromise by prudently accepting the *particula veri* of the respective side. What could a discussion with the Roman dicasteries look like that would enable the German bishops to find a face-saving way out?*

**Schönborn:** I am impressed with the patience with which the Pope and the Roman dicasteries are trying to stay in contact with the German Bishops and maintain unity and

communion. Quite a few people accuse the Pope and his staff of being too patient, saying that it is high time to react with drastic measures. No, even after the latest letter from Rome: the window for dialog remains open! My impression is that the Pope and the Roman dicasteries have gone to great lengths to accommodate the German Bishops. We should therefore also expect the German Bishops to make concessions in return - and the German Bishops should also expect the Central Committee of German Catholics not to overstep the mark.

**Tück:** *More transparency, more control, more involvement of lay people. These are demands that are rightly being made following the scandal of the systematic cover-up of abuse by Church leaders. From your perspective, considering that you have led an important diocese for several decades and have experience of the global Church, how could a more synodally embedded office of a Bishop look like?*

**Schönborn:** I think that no leading office in our society has such a detailed and proven compliance as the office of a Bishop. And it is the best proven compliance there is: the Gospel. It is not for nothing that people have a keen sense of whether a Bishop is exercising his office in accordance with the Gospel or whether he is emphasizing or abusing his power and authority. The moral authority of episcopal decisions grows, however, if they have first gone through a process of consultation and deliberation. If I may look back immodestly after almost thirty years of experience in the episcopate, this is what synodality looks like to me: A basic trust in the faithful, a grateful appreciation for all ministries and charisms in the Church, a listening heart for the signs that the Lord gives for the common journey of His people. And also, let us not forget, a willingness to bear witness - opportune or inopportune, convenient or inconvenient. Christ, the resurrected Crucified One, is and remains the compass for the exercise of the episcopal office and the common path of the Church.

## Autor/in



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Jan-Heiner Tück, geboren 1967 ist Professor am Institut für Systematische Theologie und Ethik der Universität Wien und Initiator der Wiener Poetikdozentur Literatur und Religion. Er ist Mitglied der Glaubenskommission der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz sowie Mitglied der Theologischen Kommission

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