



STOCKHOLMS KATOLSKA STIFT
DIOECESIS HOLMIENSIS

**RESPONSE TO THE DOCUMENT
'A SYNODAL CHURCH IN MISSION'
BY THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF STOCKHOLM
2024**



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission



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Background:

At the conclusion of the Bishop's Synod held in October 2023, a summary report was published, compiling the key topics that emerged from the dialogue, prayers, and discussions during the synod.

The report consists of 20 reflections and questions that it was hoped bishops' conferences and dioceses around the world would continue to work on and develop. The dioceses were to address chapters 8-12, 16, and 18 by involving individuals with different experiences, skills, and gifts, whose perspectives would help us grow as a synodal church. There was also a desire to have input from experts in theology, canon law, or other scholarly fields.

In the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm, the working group for the synodal process, along with the Vicar General, Fr. Pascal René Lung OP, has selected a project group whose perspectives form the basis for the diocese's response. The members of the group were chosen based on their specific expertise and experience.

The overarching question has been: **HOW can we take an even greater shared responsibility that also considers, and adapts to, different roles, callings, experiences, and competencies among the members of our diocese? What structures and discernment processes enable the identification, shaping, and strengthening of shared responsibility?**

In addition to the main question, the members of the project group have looked at the following topics and independently reflected on one chapter each:

- Chapter 8. *Church is Mission*
- Chapter 9. *Women in the Life and Mission of the Church*
- Chapter 10. *Consecrated Life and Lay Associations and Movements: A Charismatic Sign*
- Chapter 11. *Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church*
- Chapter 12. *The Bishop in Ecclesial Communion*
- Chapter 16. *Towards a listening and Accompanying Church*
- Chapter 18. *Structures for Participation*

The working group for the synodal process has summarized the responses contributed by each member of the project group. Since the task has been to involve individuals with different experiences, skills, and perspectives, the working group has not inserted any personal opinions or judgments but conveys the responses that have been received.



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Chapter 8. Church is Mission

Mission is an integral part of the essence of the Church. The Church's existence and fundamental mission stem from the Spirit's sending and Jesus' own words, commanding it to spread the Good News about him.

On a local level, the mission is realized in and through individual Catholic parishes. There, in their life and work, the spiritual soil exists, where people can encounter Jesus Christ and grow in faith, united with him, primarily in the Eucharist. From the local parish, the Gospel spreads, especially to its surrounding community. No Christian life can be fully lived out if it does not also actively engage and participate in the community of the parish and take its mission seriously.

If local parishes, under the leadership of bishops and priests, are to bear good fruit, **they should develop a culture of evangelization in the long term.** This can best emerge through **evangelization based on friendship.** Friendship enables reaching out to people outside the church in a personal and loving way. People today are spiritually hungry and more interested than we might realize. We must not assume that they are automatically dismissive or hostile.

The mandate and task of laypeople in realizing the call to bear witness about Christ to their surroundings are indispensable. Just as the office of the priest can never be replaced in the life of the parish, neither can the dignity and mandate of the laity be replaced. Both priest and layperson are organically and structurally interconnected in the life of the parish and its common calling. Together, they can concretely develop a vibrant and growing evangelization work. Laypeople have the unique task of reaching out as witnesses to all different areas of human life. They can be **witnesses in everyday situations** and personally engaged in the lives of individual people, as well as in the social and political life happening around them. There, we can boldly share our faith in both word and deed and give our testimony of Christ.

Strengthening and equipping laypeople in the mandate given to them by Jesus Christ, as his disciples and witnesses, is therefore one of the most important things that priests and laypeople can do together. There needs to be a high priority and continuous support for various initiatives by laypeople. **A local evangelization council** that specifically, continuously, and concretely develops evangelization in the parish could be a great asset. Through this, deepening in the Catholic faith, increased knowledge of the Bible, and a positive experience of sharing the Gospel can be encouraged.

It is important to encourage laypeople to create positive environments. This is achieved both by strengthening their Catholic identity and by encouraging meaningful interactions with people outside the church. Spending time with and becoming friends with someone facilitates dialogue. It then becomes more natural to respond to questions and to live out one's life in an environment where non-believers can both see, ask, and seek their way to faith. This is essential in a secularized world that sometimes cynically rejects the Church but is still attracted to existential authenticity, genuineness.

Here lies the Church's great calling, its greatest challenge, and most satisfying task - to help people in our time personally encounter Christ, to become rooted in the Catholic faith, and to develop a living community in Christ and his Church. This is, as the saints say, "to win souls for the kingdom of God."



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Chapter 9. Women in the Life and Mission of the Church

It is symptomatic that the document has a specific chapter about women but not about men - this indeed makes women an "issue" and contributes to objectification. **We call for reflections on men's specific contributions.**

God comes into the world through pregnancy and birth. Mary is present in the temple when the young Jesus first appears as the Son of God. It is women who first testify to the resurrection. **Therefore, it is also noteworthy that there is resistance to the femininity of the Church**, that there are forces in the Church that want a "more masculine" church. The face of the Church is that of a woman, a mother. On Pentecost, Mary was with the disciples, but already at the Annunciation, she received the Holy Spirit. **Women too are recipients of the Spirit.**

Co-responsibility is also a challenge to the Church: if we take the idea of complementarity seriously, both **men and women are needed at all levels of the Church**. Therefore, it is important to ensure that there are both male and female candidates for **the parish pastoral councils**, and one could also consider adding an abbess or another nun from an order to the **council of priests**.

Priests need assistance not only in delegating tasks but also in delegating responsibility and authority. Both priests, consecrated individuals, and laypeople need to **learn to share this responsibility** and trust in each other's competence and gifts.

Sexual inequality is still noticeable within the Church. Domestic violence is not taken fully seriously, and women are assumed to bear greater responsibility for the marital relationship than men. **The Church has a significant responsibility to convey that the call to chastity and fidelity applies equally to both genders.** A reflection here is that Mary conceived outside of marriage and was fully accepted by Joseph. Yet, today, the Church struggles to show mercy to women who become pregnant outside of marriage. To become a completely safe place the Church needs to look at women with the same regard and values as she does at men and **judge men and women by the same standards.**

In many hagiographies, it's evident that complementarity applies not only between individuals but also within the individual: **female saints have cultivated "masculine" traits, and male saints have cultivated "feminine" ones.** To become more whole as individuals we are all called to practice what we are less proficient at and to have both male and female saints as role models.

Female deacons exist within Catholic tradition, albeit not in the Latin rite. One could consider **spreading this form of female diaconate** and **expanding the role of female deacons**. Specifically, there is a need for greater opportunities, especially for women who have been subjected to abuse or for other reasons have difficulties seeking spiritual care and confession from men, to allow, for example, **female religious sisters to administer the sacrament of penance**, or for priests to grant absolution for sins confessed to a female spiritual caregiver, without the penitent needing to repeat themselves to the priest.

To have women serving as judges and in other roles throughout canonical processes is important, especially in matters related to marriage or abuse.



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Chapter 10. Consecrated Life and Lay Associations and Movements: A Charismatic Sign

The documents of the Second Vatican Council have been followed by many reflections on how to deepen and realize their contents. However, reflections are fruitless if they do not have practical consequences. **"A deeper awareness that we are brothers and sisters in Christ" is not reflected in practice.**

Even within the Catholic Church, **the focus is more on individual theological/spiritual orientation than on community and participation.** The lack of awakening cannot simply be attributed to spiritual laziness or the spirit of the times, but to the lack of programs and drive within the Church's priesthood to fulfill its mission of guiding and inspiring Catholics to embrace the fullness of the Gospel, including the new life in the Spirit and the spiritual gifts (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 12). The fullness of life in the Spirit—what is often referred to as "Baptism in the Holy Spirit"—has not been invented by Pentecostal believers but is part of Christian initiation as witnessed by the New Testament and the early Church fathers. All four Gospels present Jesus as the one who "baptizes with the Holy Spirit." When the gifts of the Spirit are sought and tested, they give the faithful the power to create the community that the Church is meant to be and to proclaim the Church's message of love, justice, and peace to the world. **This life in the Holy Spirit is therefore not one spirituality among many; it is simply the spirituality of the Church.**

The religious orders and the new spiritual movements in the Church contribute to emphasizing conversion and allowing oneself to be guided by the Spirit, which has borne fruit in many ways, but why doesn't more happen? **Why does the Church appear divided with its flourishing behind it instead of being an institution capable of permeating the world with the light and power of the Gospel?**

The document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* (2016), was addressed to the bishops as a basis for their engagement with the new spiritual movements. **The bishops need to become aware of the significance of these movements without idealizing them, and take greater responsibility for guidance, incorporating them into the overarching strategy for the Church's evangelization.** On their part, the movements must avoid the temptation of thinking that their programs represent the future of the Church, but rather open themselves to communion and participation with the whole Church. Even new movements can stagnate and lose their vitality, and instances of abuse of power and misconduct can occur, which must be addressed.

In the diocese, forums should be established where representatives of the religious orders, ecclesiastical movements, and communities can get to know each other's lives and works, both at the diocesan and local levels. This can build relationships and enhance strategic cooperation around the common mission of evangelization.

Sacraments and dogma are important, but they lose their vitality if the fullness of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit is not also received and alive in every person. **Awareness of the relationship between the Church's hierarchical/sacramental and charismatic dimensions needs to be strengthened so that more focus can be directed towards the fullness of life in the Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit - in education of both priests and laypeople.** This should especially occur in confirmation classes where seminars topics such as "Life in the Spirit" should be provided. As Christians, we stand in the gap between heaven and earth; we are filled with the Holy Spirit, yet simultaneously hungry for more of the Spirit's fullness. But without spiritual hunger, there is no drive force for renewal.



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Chapter 11. Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church

Since clericalism undoubtedly constitutes an "obstacle to service and mission" in the Church, it is necessary to promote a healthy and positive alternative: **professionalism**. This requires good spiritual leadership and openness to allowing the faithful to develop their own place in the community. **The priest must not be afraid to do what he is ordained to do**, and he should be trained to do it well. At the same time, he needs to encourage laypeople to exercise their expertise in areas where they have skills. There is a need for **structures at the parish level** to assist new priests with this and help from the diocese to support small parishes in this endeavor.

It is characteristic of a synodal church to continuously discern the various aspects of celibacy and how it serves God's people. **When reflecting on the role of celibacy in the Western Church, it is important to consider the experiences from Eastern Christianity.**

There may be a need to guide the Church on **how to integrate the three tasks of the deacon**: Liturgy, Proclamation, and Mercy. It is easy to overemphasize one of these tasks, but it is all three together that form the core of the deacon's ministry. The parts constitute a unity. **An evaluation is needed to provide a deeper understanding of the diversity in the deacon's ministry.**

To fully realize the unique status of the permanent diaconate, a renewed theological understanding of the sacrament of ordination is required. A better understanding of the deacon's vocation entails a deeper understanding of the role of the priest. Perhaps inspiration can be found in the early Church as well as in Eastern traditions regarding how the role of the deacon in the Church can be practiced in the modern Western world? One proposal is **longer periods as deacons for future priests**. Another is that **older married deacons**, where necessary for the good of the faithful, **can be ordained as priests**. Such measures could help developing the specific role of the deacon while emphasizing the unity in the vocation to ordained ministry.

The unity within the ordained ministry can be further contemplated through an examination of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*. How can the formation of permanent deacons and the formation of priests collaborate and enrich each other? One beneficial approach could involve **partially shared studies and sessions for deacons**, where possible, at the seminaries for priests. **Candidates for the permanent diaconate can bring a connection to the world that may be lacking in the seminary, while the seminary could serve as a spiritual home and prayer school for future permanent deacons.** Brotherhood between future priests and future deacons could lay a solid foundation for collaboration among ordained ministers in pastoral life. Without relinquishing too much of the traditional philosophical and theological content of priestly formation, there needs to be **more space for and promotion of the diversity of practical skills required in today's parishes.**

Openness and the ability to demand accountability are crucial to ensuring the credibility of the Church in today's world. However, in a synodal church, this should not only mean control from above but also a culture from below. It is equally essential that there are support functions for priests, deacons, and laypeople at diocesan and parish levels to help them perform their tasks well and to ensure a healthy psychosocial work environment.

The issue of reinstating priests must be handled on a case-by-case basis, but there is also a need for **clear guidelines** to assist bishops in discerning what is right in each specific case. It is important to listen attentively to the laity as well.



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Chapter 12. The Bishop in Ecclesial Communion

The Diocesan Bishop and the Financial Council – shared responsibility in practice

The Catholic Diocese of Stockholm constitutes, in civil terms, a registered religious community under the name of Roman Catholic Church. To be registered as a religious community according to Swedish civil law, the religious community must have a board, which is constituted by the finance council. Members of the finance council are appointed by the bishop of the diocese in conjunction with the diocesan council. According to the civil statutes, the bishop's approval is required for a decision of the finance council to be valid.

According to Swedish civil law, each individual member of a board is responsible for the management of the organization's funds and for ensuring that the organization complies with applicable civil laws and regulations. **Each layperson in the diocese's finance council bears the same responsibility as the bishop of the diocese.**

Additionally, the parishes within the diocese are registered religious communities and are subjects to the same civil regulations as the diocese, including the requirement for a board. **The parish finance council constitutes the civil board, and its members are elected by the parish.**

Recently, the bishop established a new *parish statute*, which serves as both civil statutes and regulations for the parishes. The bishop has further **emphasized the individual responsibility of the members of the parish finance councils for the management of the parish's properties and finances.** The bishop has also strengthened the authority of the finance councils concerning matters affecting the finances of the parishes.

This strong lay responsibility for the affairs of the diocese and parishes, in the legal matters and matters of economy, originates from the Swedish tradition of association law, which is also reflected in civil legislation. It has not always been easy to harmonize canonical law with Swedish legislation and association traditions, but we believe that it now functions well and contributes to ensuring a high quality in the management of the diocese's and parishes' properties and finances.

The Diocesan Bishop and the work against abuse – the bishop bears ultimate responsibility

For the past 20 years, the diocese has had a Safeguarding Plan Against Sexual Abuse of Children and Youth, which regulates the work of preventing and managing issues related to abuse. The Vicar General is responsible for receiving reports of abuse and must immediately take action upon allegations or suspicions of abuse. The Vicar General leads the investigations and provides ongoing updates to the bishop, who makes the decisive decisions.

The diocese also has a Working Group for Issues Related to Sexual Abuse. The Working Group consists of the Vicar General (chairperson), the child protection officer, the bishop's vicar for priests and deacons, the bishop's vicar for canonical issues, and laypersons with expertise in psychology, law and communication. The Vicar General and the child protection officer inform the Working Group about ongoing investigations. The Working Group may provide recommendations to the bishop regarding a specific decision in an ongoing investigation.

The procedural rules of the Safeguarding Plan relieve the diocesan Bishop of the actual investigative work while retaining the bishop's decision-making authority. We believe that this arrangement should continue to function in the future.



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Chapter 16. Towards a Listening and Accompanying Church

As Christians, we are called to love and live Caritas, to walk the path of love for God and our neighbor. Listening and accompanying become the fruit of this way of life. **The call to serve our neighbor is the calling of every Christian person.** The call to listen to and walk alongside our neighbors is a calling that we all have received. **Living out this calling in our communities is crucial for our survival and for the salvation of all.** It is our duty to embrace this virtue if we want our community to flourish.

Love in action – living Caritas as a tool for love

Formalizing a service for listening and accompanying should not be at the center of attention. As a believing community, we are called to walk together and accompany each other. We are all called to listen unconditionally. The Church should be a place where we listen and accompany people towards Christ. We must recognize that this is everyone's calling, and we should not try to make it complicated. Caritas helps to give structure to charitable work within our communities. By integrating youth organizations active in the dioceses into Caritas, we can breathe new life into the call and realization of the listening and accompanying communal journey.

This is a Christological exercise that we must embrace. We must rely on the Holy Spirit and the wisdom and experience of the Church. The virtue of love must flow from God's grace and the lived experiences of the faithful. For this purpose the existing structures within the Church should refocus and enable continuous formation of our hearts, so that everyone of us can live out the call to self-giving, compassionate love.

The Church's structures should provide opportunities for encounters where self-giving compassionate love can operate in practice.



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Chapter 18. Structures for Participation

As baptized individuals, we all share Christ's gifts, his Word, the sacraments, the holiness. This is the first and fundamental participation we all have in common – whether we are laypeople or priests. **The first mission of all believers is to activate this participation, i.e., to receive God's gifts.**

Through baptism, everyone has received a share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly office. This means that **everyone has a part in the mission of the holy Church.**

This mission aims to **transform the world to become more Christ-like.**

- The priestly mission consists of living a holy life through prayer and receiving God's gifts.
- The prophetic mission consists of bearing witness to Christ's message and the teachings of the Church in words and actions. Witnessing with one's life.
- The kingly mission consists of governing oneself and participating in the Church's leadership through consultation and decision-making.

The parish has pastoral and economy-councils elected by its members, that, together with the parish priest, bear the pastoral and economic responsibility for the congregation; the council reflects the diversity within the congregation.

The church is structured hierarchically. The parish priest has the final say in the congregation. **How can we reconcile the synodal with the hierarchical principle? Would it be a good idea to separate the pastoral and economic responsibilities?**

There are certain things that are non-negotiable: the central tenets of Catholic faith and moral doctrine, the Church's fundamental structure as an episcopally organized institution with the pope at its head.

Nevertheless, the question remains of **how we can integrate the culture of communion, as advocated by synodality, into the structures?** This also relates to credibility in mission.

To achieve greater participation, spiritual discernment is needed in community at various levels of the church.