

Project “Synodal Way - World Church Perspectives”

Results on the first quantitative phase - an overview

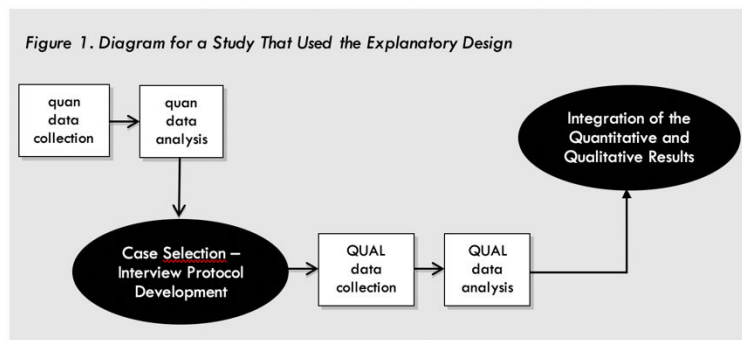
Introduction

Since 2015, when Pope Francis set synodality as the way forward for the Church of the third millennium, the Catholic Church worldwide has taken steps to deepen both the theory and practice of a synodal Church. On the one hand, this process aims to reflect on the Church’s future in the present world context, its challenges, problems, and possibilities; on the other hand, it is a way to face the greatest crisis the Catholic Church is experiencing today. In recent years, several local churches have been discussing how to build a truly participatory and synodal Church.

In Germany, the so-called “Synodal Way”, an ecclesiastical reform process supported equally by the laity and the official Church is intended to identify the structural aspects underlying the abuse of power and to develop solutions for further development. The questions of power and the clerical way of life, the separation of powers and participation, and the responsibility of women in the church are particularly the focus of the debate.

Within the framework of the project “Synodal Way - World Church Perspectives” ([Link](#)), the institutions “Catholic Academic Exchange Service (KAAD)” and the “Institute for the Global Church and Mission” (IWM) are conducting an empirical study in which an international group of participants from different local churches has been asked about the topics of the German reform debate. In doing so, the thematic complexes of the Synodal Way are to be viewed from the perspective of other Global Church contexts, classified in terms of their relevance at the various levels of Church life, and analyzed in terms of their significance. Conversely, it is to be found out which topics the faithful in other cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts attach relevance to and what weightings they give to them.

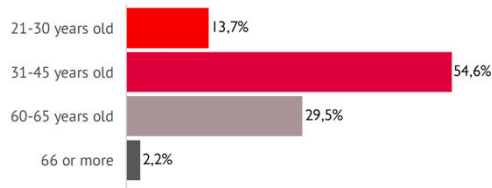
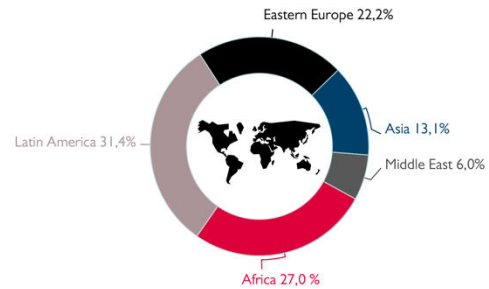
To achieve these goals, a “Mixed Explanatory Design” method is used with a first quantitative phase (already completed) and a second qualitative phase (in progress). In the first quantitative phase, scholarship holders and alumni of KAAD, Albertus Magnus Program (AMP) and Stipendienwerk Lateinamerika-Deutschland e.V. (ICALA) were invited to participate in an online survey to get their opinion on the four main topics discussed on the Synodal Way in Germany.



Source: Creswell, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 121

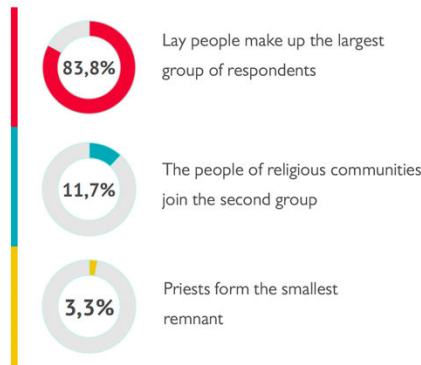
Four groups of questions were asked for this purpose. Each group initially consisted of three statements on the respective topic. Followed by three questions on the relevance of the topic for the participants personally, their local community and their local Church. And finally, one question on the relevance of the topic in the future. Participants were asked to rank how strongly they agreed with each of the statements, using a response range of 1 (“I disagree”) to 5 (“I agree”). The survey was conducted online from April 1-17, 2022.

The final sample consisted of 599 respondents from 67 countries divided into five main regions: Africa (26.8%), Middle East (6.7%), Eastern Europe (21.9%), Asia (13.5%), and Latin America (31.3%).



Participants ranged in age from 21 to 80: 13.7% were between 21 and 30 years old, 54.4% between 31 and 45 years old, 29.4% between 46 and 65 years old, and 2.2% were 66 years old or older.

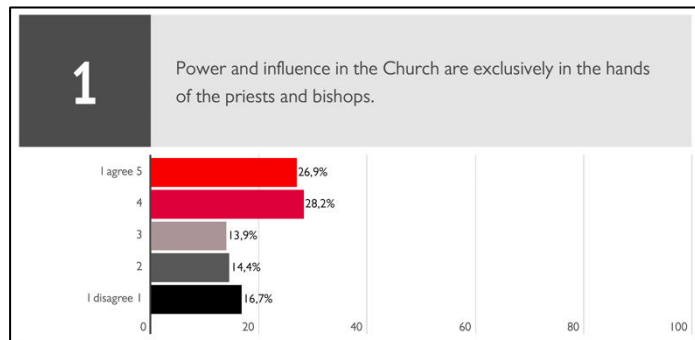
56.6% described themselves as male and 43.4% as female. Almost nine out of ten (88.3%) were lay, 11.7% religious, and 3.2% priests. In addition, the largest group consisted of Roman Catholics (89.2%), while other denominations, such as Greek Catholics, Maronites, and Ethiopian Catholics, were represented between 2 and 3% each. Finally, nine disciplines were represented, with humanities (42.6%), social sciences (21.5%), engineering (10.2%), and medical sciences (9.3%) being the most numerous.



Results on the topic “Power and separation of powers in the Church”.

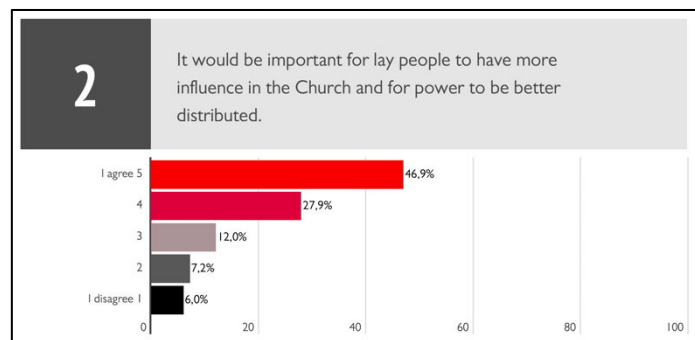
On the first topic, “Power and Separation of Powers in the Church - Joint Participating in the Mission”, the following three statements were included:

(a) “Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops”, with a mean of 3.34 and a standard deviation of 1.43. This means that the participants had an ambivalent positive opinion about this first statement and there were relevant differences between the respondents.



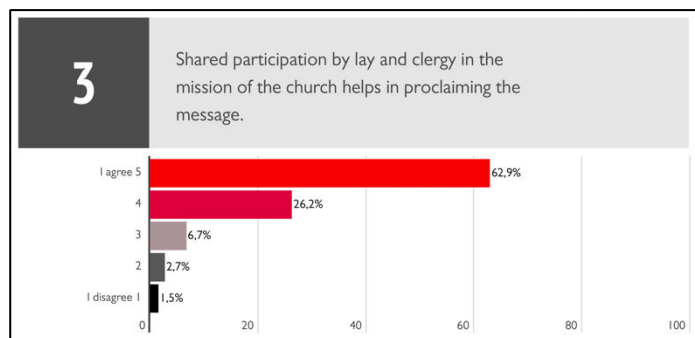
Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 3.34; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.43.

(b) “It would be important for lay people to have more influence in the Church and for power to be better distributed”, with a mean of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 1.19. In this case, respondents rated this item positively, although some important differences can be noted.



Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 4.03; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.19.

(c) “Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message” had a mean of 4.46, the highest under this theme, and a standard deviation of 0.85, showing higher consensus among respondents.

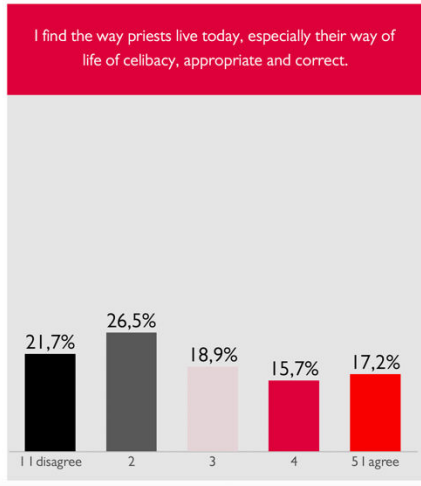


Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 4.46; Standard deviation (SD) = 0.85.

When the differences between the groups are analyzed according to the background variables, the results show significant differences only between the regions. For example, for the first statement (“Power and influence in the Church are exclusively in the hands of the priests and bishops”), agreement was lowest among respondents from Latin America (M = 3.10) and highest among those from the Middle East (M = 3.70), while for the second, agreement was lowest among participants from Eastern Europe (M = 3.85) and highest among those from Asia (M = 4.36). For the third statement (“Shared participation of lay and clergy in the mission of the Church helps in proclaiming the message”), the differences were smaller (M between 4.23 in Eastern Europe and 4.60 in Africa).

Results on "Priestly existence today".

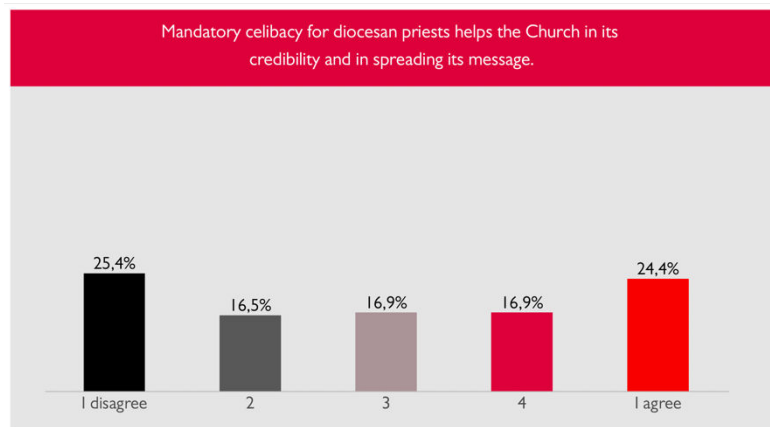
On the second topic, “Priestly existence today”, the following three statements were evaluated by the participants:



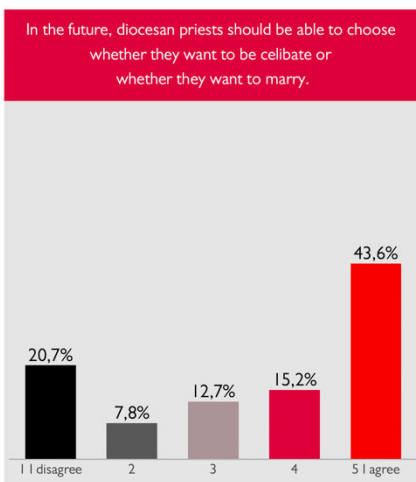
(a) “I find the way priests live today, especially their way of life of celibacy, appropriate and correct”, with a mean of 2.80 and a standard deviation of 1.39. This means that participants had an ambivalent negative opinion about this first statement, with visible differences between respondents.

Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 2.80; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.39.

(b) “Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message”, with a mean of 2.98 and a standard deviation of 1.52. In this case, respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this item. The differences between respondents were even greater than before.



Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 2.98; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.52.



(c) “In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry” had a mean of 3.53, the only one above the mean but still ambivalently positive, and a standard deviation of 1.59, showing a wide dispersion in the responses.

Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 3.53; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.59.

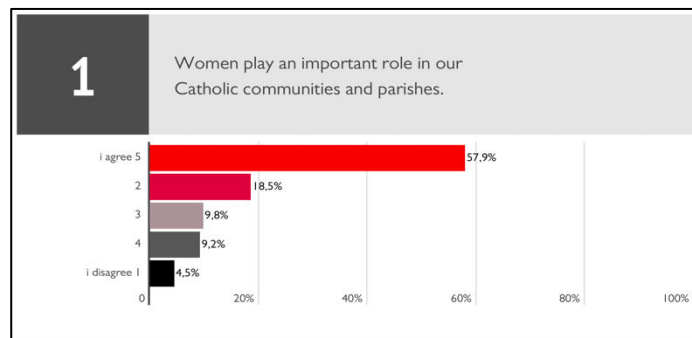
When analyzing the differences between the groups according to the background variables, the results show significant differences between regions (for the three statements), lifestyles (for the first two), and denominations (for the second and third). For example, the most significant differences appear for the second statement (“Mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests helps the Church in its credibility and in spreading its message”), where respondents from Latin America had a negative opinion ($M = 2.33$), while those from Asia had a more positive opinion ($M = 3.77$).

Similarly, for the third question (“*In the future, diocesan priests should be able to choose whether they want to be celibate or whether they want to marry*”), participants from Asia showed an ambivalent opinion ($M = 2.93$), while those from the Middle East were most positive about this statement ($M = 4.15$). In addition, lay participants’ agreement with all statements was lower than the one of members of a religious congregation and clergy. It was also noticeable that Greek Catholics, Maronites, and Ethiopian Catholics among the participants agreed more strongly with the third statement than the Roman Catholics surveyed.

Findings on “Women in the Ministry of the Church”.

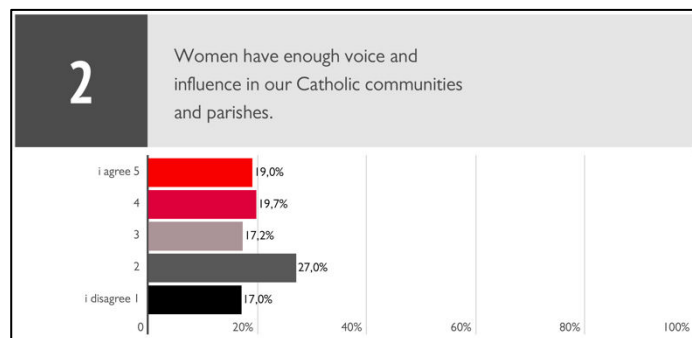
In addition, the following three statements were included for the third topic:

(a) “Women play an important role in our Catholic communities and parishes” had a mean of 4.16, the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 1.20, showing visible differences among respondents.



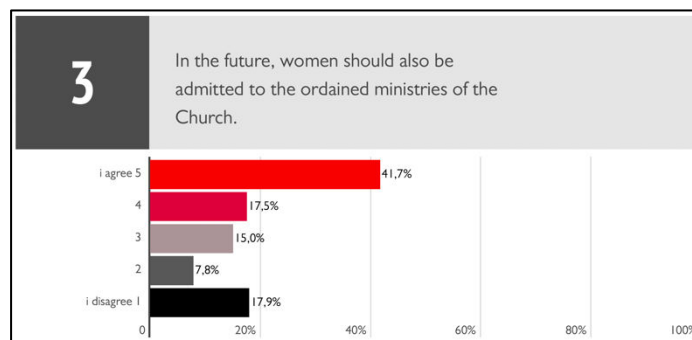
Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 4.16; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.20.

(b) “Women have enough voice and influence in our Catholic communities and parishes”, with a mean of 2.97 and a standard deviation of 1.38. In this case, respondents have an ambivalent opinion on this item, and the differences between respondents are larger than before.



Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 2.97; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.38.

(c) “In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church” had a mean of 3.57, slightly above the middle point but still ambivalently positive, and a standard deviation of 1.52, showing a wide dispersion of responses.



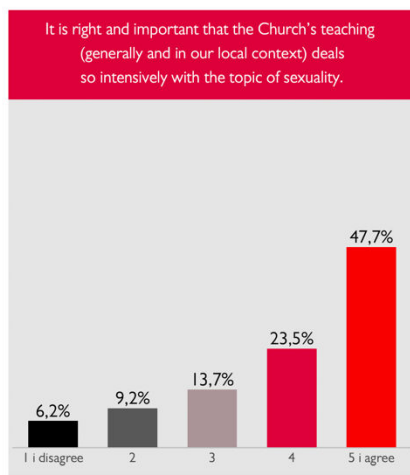
Respondents (N) = 599; Mean (M) = 3.57; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.52.

Comparing the results between groups, significant differences between gender, regions, lifestyle, and denomination emerge. For example, male respondents agreed more strongly than female respondents with the second statement (“*Women have enough voice and influence in our*”).

Catholic communities and parishes”) ($M = 3.11$ and 2.78 , respectively). At the same time, the opposite was true for the third statement (“*In the future, women should also be admitted to the ordained ministries of the Church*”) ($M = 3.37$ and 3.83 , respectively). In addition, respondents' answers suggest that Latin America is a region that is particularly interested in the topic, open to reform, and critical of the current situation of women; in contrast, respondents from Eastern Europe showed lower levels of agreement and assessment of the relevance of this topic. Finally, Maronite, Ethiopian, and Armenian Catholics among the participants showed higher agreement and interest in the topic than Greek Catholics.

Results on the topic “Living in fulfilling relationships - living love in sexuality and partnership”.

On the last topic, the following three statements were rated by the participants:

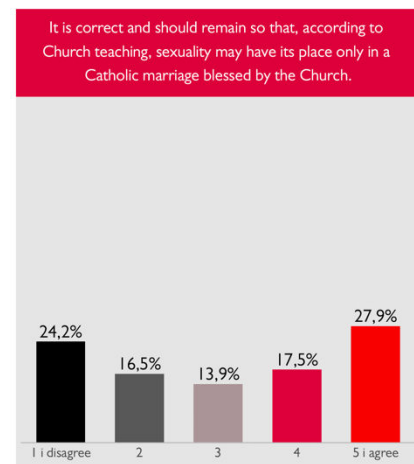


(a) “It is right and important that the Church’s teaching (generally and in our local context) deals intensively with the topic of sexuality” had a mean of 3.97 , the highest within this theme, and a standard deviation of 1.24 , showing visible differences between respondents.

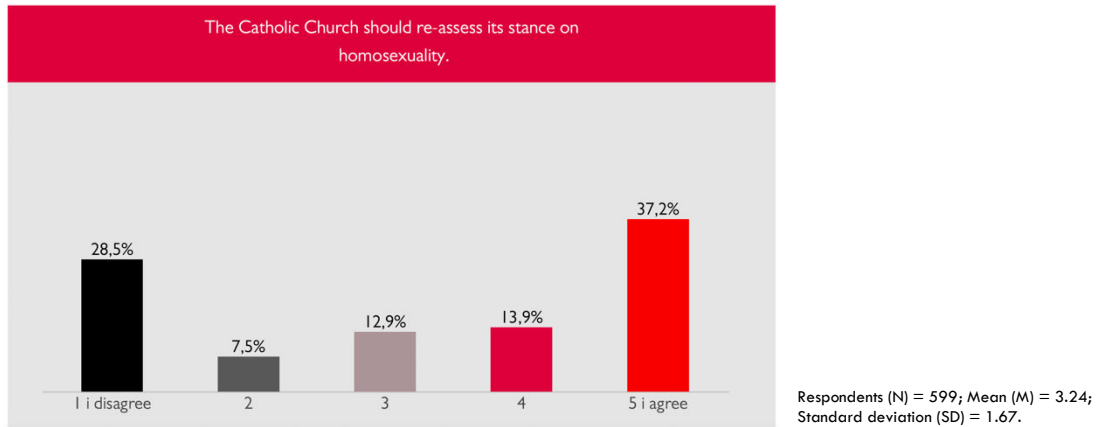
Respondents ($N = 599$); Mean (M) = 3.97 ; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.24 .

(b) “It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church”, with a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 1.56 . This means that respondents had an ambivalent opinion on this point and the differences between respondents were greater than before.

Respondents ($N = 599$); Mean (M) = 3.08 ; Standard deviation (SD) = 1.56 .

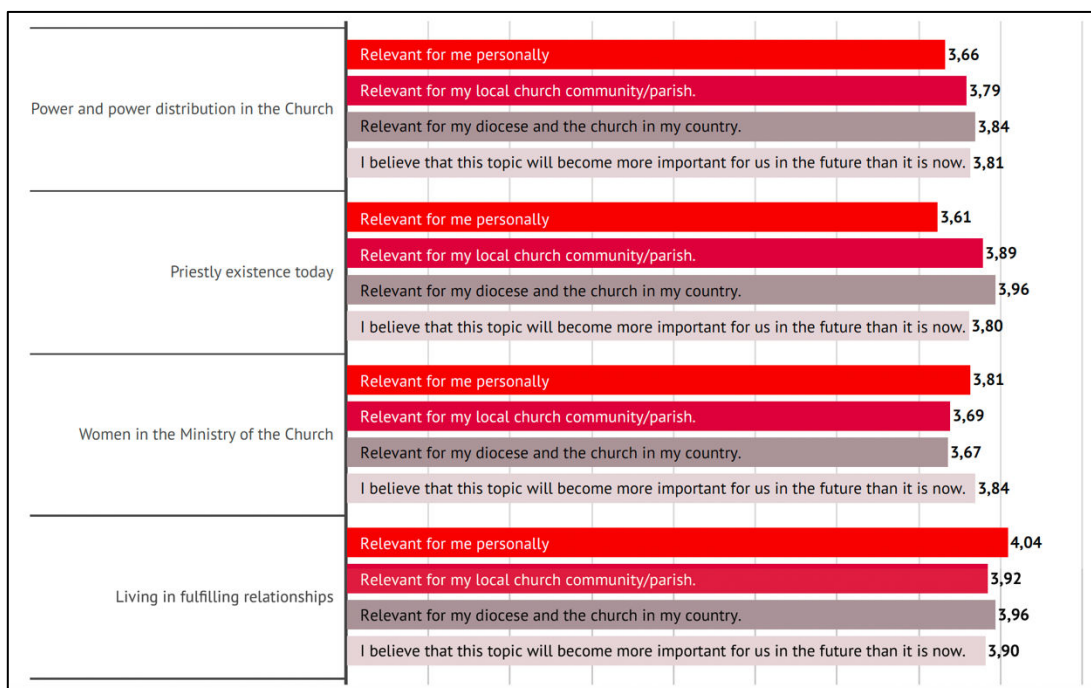


(c) “The Catholic Church should re-assess its stance on homosexuality” had a mean of 3.24 , slightly above the middle point and still ambivalent, and a standard deviation of 1.67 , showing a wide dispersion of responses.



When analyzing possible differences between the groups, significant differences can be found between regions and denominations in all cases and, for some specific items, between gender and age. For example, Latin America was the region from which respondents most clearly disagreed with statement two (*“It is right and should remain so that, according to Church teaching, sexuality may have its place only in a Catholic marriage blessed by the Church”*) ($M = 2.37$), while participants from Africa showed the higher level of agreement ($M = 3.57$). Conversely, Latino respondents rated statement three (*“The Catholic Church should re-assess its stance on homosexuality”*) positively ($M = 4.16$), while those from Africa did so negatively ($M = 2.03$). Gender differences were only evident for statement three, where women showed higher agreement than men ($M = 3.45$ vs. 3.07). Finally, age only played a differentiating role in the topic’s relevance: the younger the respondents were, the more relevant the topic was to them.

Results on the relevance of the topics



Regarding the relevance of the individual topics for the respondents, all topics are considered relevant by the respondents. The topic complexes 'sexuality' and 'women' are the most important for them personally (with mean values of 4.04 and 3.81, respectively), followed by power and priestly existence (with mean values of 3.66 and 3.61, respectively). Looking at the relevance to the diocese or Church in their country, the order is slightly different: sexuality ($M = 3.92$ and 3.96) and priestly existence ($M = 3.89$ and 3.96) lead the priorities, followed closely by power ($M = 3.79$ and 3.84). Women fall in last place ($M = 3.69$ and 3.67). There are significant differences between respondents in all cases, with standard deviations ranging from 1.13 to 1.40.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that the participants are positively inclined to strengthen the role and influence of the laity in the Church in order to achieve a better distribution of power, which can also help in the proclamation of the message. Both aspects get clear approval, showing the highest values in the survey and a clear consensus within the sample. In contrast, there were ambivalent opinions regarding the value of celibacy and the way priests live today. However, participants also did not clearly agree with letting them decide on their lifestyle in the future.

In addition, the role of women in parishes was visibly well evaluated; yet respondents expressed ambivalent opinions about their influence in their parishes and communities. The idea of allowing them to be admitted to ordained ministries seems controversial, with a mean value just above the midpoint and a large difference between the respondents' opinions (standard deviation). Finally, most respondents agree that the Church should be intensely concerned with the issue of sexuality, yet, their opinions about the Church's current teaching on sexuality, marriage, and homosexuality are more ambivalent.

Analyses of variance between groups by background variables showed that the region of origin significantly differed in all cases. In contrast, other variables such as gender, lifestyle, or religious denomination mattered only in some specific aspects.

We are aware that the research participants are or were scholarship holders in Germany and therefore have gained intercultural experience, which we consider a positive contribution to this research. They also have a relationship with Germany, which does not mean that they automatically adopted the German perspective, as shown by the significant differences (= standard deviations) in responses, especially by region.

Considering these results, focus groups by region will be conducted in the current qualitative phase to better understand the regional differences in opinion that emerged in the quantitative phase and their reasons. Only in such intercultural conversations will we be able to consider the issues of the Synodal Way from a Global Church perspective.

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