



CONCERNED CATHOLICS CANBERRA GOULBURN MEDIA RELEASE

German Assembly shows how Gospel guides reform

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An Australian observer at the recent Assembly on the German Synodal Way, Susan Sullivan, has reported on the robust and candid discussions involving lay people and bishops on issues including women's ordination, priestly celibacy and acceptance of gay and transgender members.

Susan, a member of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, attended the conference in Frankfurt in early March at the invitation of the co-chairs of the German Synod. "It was an extraordinary opportunity to witness at close hand the workings of the German approach to synodality..." Susan says.

Many of the assembly debates were based on a contemporary anthropology of the human person, and a theology grounded in the Gospel's witness to compassion. "These are the same issues articulated in Australia, but yet to be met with such a compassionate, practical and inclusive response," she says.

Her comprehensive report on the Assembly can be viewed at [230310+-+REPORT+-+on+the+German+Synod+-+Susan+Sullivan.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com/230310+-+REPORT+-+on+the+German+Synod+-+Susan+Sullivan.pdf).

The German Synodal Path was explicitly a response to the sex abuse crisis and its cover-up, and the findings of what is known as the MHG study on sexual abuse. The themes focusing the Synod arose from that study and are consistent with those arising from the consultations leading up to the Australian Plenary Council: Power and separation of powers in the Church, priestly existence, women in ministries, and life in sexuality and partnership.

She says the Assembly attendees appeared to include a reasonable balance of gender and a younger than expected age profile, with many in the first half of life – a contrast to the predominance of ageing Catholics actively participating in similar events in Australia.

Susan was impressed by the robust meeting processes designed to create transparency and meaningful, inclusive participation. This included seating arrangements that meant bishops, religious and lay people were randomly seated together.

“The debates across all the issues reflected a breadth of perspectives and often robust exchange on widely divergent positions. The obvious engagement, activism on emerging issues and confidence of the non-clerical participants was impressive. It was personally astonishing and humbling to listen to the interventions of people who identify as transgender and gay addressing the assembly in a confident and unapologetic way.”

She was “intrigued by the candidness of the bishops, their willingness to openly name hard issues and to be honest about what is really happening in the church.

On the issue of obligatory celibacy for instance ... there was a refreshing honesty that the present situation is unsustainable.

“The issues around sexuality were confronted in a startlingly frank and direct way, and refreshingly, grounded in sound, thorough scientific research... based on a contemporary anthropology of the human person, and a theology grounded in the Gospel’s witness to compassion. These are the same issues articulated in Australia, but yet to be met with such a compassionate, practical and inclusive response.

“The success of motions on blessings for same-sex couples, divorced and remarried Catholics and couples who choose to not marry, prompted a very emotional outbreak of exuberant, sustained celebration.

“Likewise, the session on the final day, “Women and sacramental ministry” resulted in a very emotional debate with movingly heartfelt interventions by a number of women.”

Germany’s Cardinal Marx reflected on his own change of heart stating that over time the arguments against women had become weaker and less acceptable. However, realpolitik prevailed and the final motion put to the Assembly was worded to request the Vatican “to open sacramental diaconate to women”.

The German Synod has provoked considerable controversy primarily around concerns that outcomes pose the risk of schism. Implicit in this concern appears to be the belief that the adoption of different practices in different places threatens unity. “I returned from Frankfurt with the conviction that the

question of ‘unity in diversity’ is central to the success of this new movement in the Church to adopt synodality as its modus operandi.”

The assembly wrestled to build consensus. For example, the text on priestly celibacy was modified to recommend the Vatican re-examine rather than rescind obligatory celibacy, a significant moderation in tone.

The texts relating to women in ministry ultimately chose to advocate for diaconate rather than priestly ordination.

A question central to Susan’s observations was why and how the German Church has achieved such a contemporary and cogent perspective on the issues facing the Church. A significant factor has been the long-established status and access to bishops of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), a lay Catholic organisation that has developed a key relationship with the hierarchy since it began in 1868.

“Synodality is seen as a renewed and renewing path for the Church today. So, like all things new and the Gospel imperative to “be made new”, we need to engage by drawing on the best of our intellectual wisdom combined with spiritual wisdom, drawing on the core spiritual virtues of perseverance, humility, patience and above all hope,” Susan says.

The Assembly proceedings were live-streamed and are now available on the Assembly website with English translation at <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english>.

Contact: Mark Metherell 0417 603 697