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## Konzil, Dialog und Demokratie

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The Second Vatican Council is rightly considered a turning point in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and of Christianity in general. As with every church council, however, Vatican II was only able to influence the life of the Church and of the faithful because its decisions were embraced and implemented. In fact, the reception of the Second Vatican Council took various forms, among which synods took on special prominence as a recently rediscovered approach. In spite of this, these synods have been largely overlooked by church historians over the last three decades. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council explicitly wished for a reactivation of synods. In Western Europe, and in the German-speaking countries in particular, synods were considered a suitable means for facilitating the reception of the Vatican Council's ecclesiology: the synods put into practice the theology of *communio* and strengthened the responsibilities of laypeople in the Church. In this book, the preparation of the Common Synod of the Dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany (Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) is analysed as a central process in the reception history of Vatican II in the former West Germany.

The common synod was prepared primarily by the German Conference of Catholic Bishops (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz) and the Central Committee of German Catholics (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken). Both organisations were important agents of change but also needed to be reformed themselves, according to the theology of the Vatican II. By initiating the synod, the bishops and laypeople were not only reacting to theological innovations but also to social and cultural changes that affected many Catholics, not least priests. Commitment to the Church had become considerably weaker among Catholics in the years following the end of the Second World War, a fact that became particularly obvious as regular church attendance ceased to be a common phenomenon. The growing dissent over Catholic doctrine and ecclesiastical structures culminated after the publication of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* in 1968. In Germany, it was the *Katholikentag* (congress of German Catholics) in Essen where mainly young Catholics protested against papal authority and demanded a democratisation of the Church. In the same context, they called for a national synod of the Catholic Church in Germany to be held.

The idea of a national synod in Germany was strongly influenced by the example of the Dutch Pastoral synod (1966-70). In their synod, the Dutch Catholics had experimented with a new and democratic way of cooperating on a national level characterized by discussion and dialogue. For more conservative Catholics, however, the Dutch experiment signified the dissolution of traditional ecclesiastical structures and of the Catholic faith itself.

The *Katholikentag* in Essen, with its wholesale questioning of authoritarian structures within the Church, was an unsettling experience for many bishops and other leading figures in the Church. The critical assessment of this experience led to the appointment of a »study group« to analyse the state of Catholicism in West Germany and consider the question of

establishing a national council. Only a few months later, the study group recommended holding a common synod of the dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany. The special form of a »common synod« (Gemeinsame Synode) was created to account for the fact that Germany was a divided nation where a truly national synod was impossible for political reasons. At the same time, the common synod was a response to the fact that pastoral issues were broadly the same in all dioceses in the late 1960s. Up to that point, the only diocesan synod that had been called into being had been in Hildesheim in 1968. The Hildesheim synod served as a model for the common synod at the national level because laypeople had been admitted as official members for the first time, whereas, according to canon law, only priests could participate in a diocesan synod.

In February 1969, the bishops decided to hold a common synod and asked the members of the study group to formulate a statute and a list of topics for the synod to address. The statute became a matter of discussion in different respects. Many groups within German Catholicism wanted the statute to be discussed publicly, over a suitable length of time, while the organisers made a point of passing it without delay or the involvement of the public. Thus, the process of developing the statute became a first case in point regarding the cooperation between bishops and laypeople. The crucial point of the statute itself was the question of how the synod should arrive at its decisions. In traditional synods, the bishop had been the sole legislator but that would have demoted the synod to a mere advisory assembly. Eventually, the authors of the statute found a solution that invested the entire synod with decision-making power while still preserving the bishops' authority (in the form of a veto that they nonetheless needed to justify).

Further steps on the way to the synod were planned by an official »preparing commission.« In order to involve the Catholic public in the preparation, the members of this commission chose the popular method of an opinion survey. They launched a large-scale survey that attempted mainly to raise interest in the synod but had no real influence on the catalogue of topics to be discussed there. These were instead drafted by a few members of the commission who consulted the opinions of several selected experts. The catalogue of topics was formulated in an open manner that later allowed the synod to set its own priorities. The commission also had to answer the important question of who should be a member of the synod and how these members were to be chosen. The statute determined that the diocesan councils were to elect more than half of the synod members. After this election, the *Zentralkomitee* and the bishops' conference would either elect or appoint the remaining members in order to make the synod a more representative body.

After nearly two years of preparation, the chairman of the bishops' conference, Cardinal Julius Döpfner, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, finally opened the synod in the cathedral of Würzburg in 1971. The preparing commission had chosen an ecclesiastical building as the venue and the bishops and the elected members of the synod gathered there for both the opening religious service as well as the constitutive session of the synod. The location of both the opening and subsequent sessions demonstrated the ambivalent character of the synod. While the cathedral symbolised the sacred elements, the parliamentary seating arrangement revealed its origin in the democratisation movement of the late 1960s. The first session of the synod was constitutive not only in terms of organisation. By several small acts,

e. g. the answer to the papal address or the election of the organs of the synod, the plenum detached itself from the preparing commission and constituted itself as a new actor for the reception of the Second Vatican Council. Finally, a first topical discussion made clear that the synod's main task should be to apply Vatican II's *aggiornamento* to the conditions obtaining in the dioceses of West Germany.