



Interview: Listening is the beginning of loving

Die Weltbischofssynode, das Zuhören und Social Media – darüber handelte das Interview von István Gégény von Medujul.hu mit Bischof Stefan Oster am Ende der Weltsynode. Das Interview ist hier in englischer Sprache nachzulesen.

The German bishop is active on social media, he sees in his own context no big distance between clergy and laity, but he believes that the sacrament of forgiveness of sins is in crisis. He considers it important to educate the faithful and to ensure that decisions in the Church are truly made with the collaboration of the Holy Spirit and the involvement of all the Catholics concerned.

István Gégény: I have a vivid image of the morning of the last working day of the Synod of Bishops, when the participants kept arriving for the closing session – bishops, priests, monks, nuns, lay faithful – many of them carrying backpacks. Representatives of a truly diverse Church had gathered. At the end of the Synod, what is in your backpack, what are you taking home to the Diocese of Passau?

Bischof Stefan Oster: I am taking home the final document, which the Holy Father has announced will become part of the Pontifical Magisterium. It used to be the custom for the Pope to receive the final document of the synod and then to publish a post-synodal exhortation. This was not the case this time, and I was very surprised. On the whole, I am satisfied with the text of the document, especially because it also talks a lot about the spiritual dimension of synodality. If anybody looks at the chapter titles, the first four main sections are about conversion: conversion by the Holy Spirit, conversion in our relationships, conversion in processes, conversion in bonds. What does that mean? You can take it as a mere theological phrase. But you can also take it seriously: It talks about being changed by the Holy Spirit. And this is an ongoing, a lifelong process – in individuals, in groups, in the whole Church.

The strength and also the weakness of the final document is that there are many people who were expecting some clear guidance on what has to be done now, clear rules. But it is not that prescriptive. The final document offers encouraging advice and suggestions, asking us to step out of our habitual situations and become missionary disciples. And it is also a very optimistic vision. For, if you ask believers in your own country if they are missionary disciples, many might not understand what that means, while the document seems to assume it as the most natural thing for a Christian to be. Yet we know that in reality it is not the most natural thing.

So I take home an experience, a wonderful experience of becoming friends with many people, also with some with whom we disagree on certain points. And this is also the vision of Pope Francis, that we move together in harmony, which does not necessarily mean that we agree on everything. But we do have a common Gospel and we must go out into the world to be missionaries of evangelical joy. So I'm taking that with me and I'm going home in a very good mood, trying to talk to people about this experience and try to use the method of "conversation in the Spirit" at some levels of my work. We ourselves have to be ambassadors of synodality. The most serious issues that came up in the synod – e.g. on women's ordination – will be further discussed by the synodal study groups, which will continue to work on them. We will see what happens, because on some theological, moral or dogmatic issues, there were some intense debates and disagreement.

Gégény: You are a bishop, I am a layman. We are both working to build and renew the same Church. Before the synod began, it seemed to me that there was a gap between the clergy and the laity. We, the faithful, were waiting for you to tell us where to go. Meanwhile, we sometimes felt like second-class members of God's people. Meanwhile, you, the clergy, may have felt that I was working at full speed and you were just waiting. My hope is that, thanks to the synod that has just ended, perhaps the two groups can come closer together. What do you think about this?

Bischof Oster: The question seems understandable from your point of view, but I don't have the feeling that there is a big gap between me and a layman – at least not in our German context. There are already many boards and advisory bodies in every diocese and parishes. And in my own diocese clergy and laity are quite close. But there is still the question: How can we walk together, on the same path, guided by the Holy Spirit? This is a new challenge. We usually take it for granted that we all believe in something similar, but we should recognize that as Christians we all need to walk together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in every moment of the life of the Church. I think that is the vision of Pope Francis. His most recent encyclical on the heart of Jesus was published just a few days before the end of the Synod. Both, the final document

and the encyclical are a kind of legacy that the Pope is handing over to us. It is about a spiritual attitude, about walking together in the spirit. If we could succeed in realizing this together in our communities and parishes, it would make a big difference. In my country, I sometimes have the impression that our councils and advisory bodies are somehow tired. But the final document and the new encyclical both speak about the enthusiasm and fire that comes from walking in the Spirit. What a beautiful vision!

We also spoke at the Synod about decision-making and decision-taking. And here it is important to distinguish between the process of finding the way to a decision including the participation of many people – and the decision-taking itself – the latter being the task of the authority. This is in the final document more clearly explained than in the working document. We find a biblical example of such a process in the Acts of the Apostles: The first Council discussed the question of presuppositions in order to become a follower of Christ: Do you have to accept the Jewish law? For example, circumcision... Obviously there was a big argument about this at the time, and then Peter says that the Holy Spirit had already decided. Finally, they all wrote a letter in which they say: "The Holy Spirit and we have decided". And that procedure contains a strong message.

The decision does not simply come from our own minds, but also comes from the Spirit who reveals Himself in an honest dialogue, in listening to each other and to Him carefully. With His help we can find the truth, the direction in which we can go. We do not produce this decision, but we find it by listening to each other and listening to God, and we can find unity with His help. And it is still in the same Spirit when Peter, as the authority, fulfills his role and takes the decision at the end of the process. This seems to be some ideal form of an ecclesial decision-making and decision-taking process. We can come to unity when we find our way together in listening, listening to one another, discerning the signs of the times, and listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Yet, this form also presupposes a good and trustful relationship between the people who consult and the people who decide. The reality is always a little different from the ideal, but hopefully by recognizing that we are drawn by the same Spirit, we will actually walk together and share a common joy. I am optimistic about how the church of the future will work.

Gégény: You have just used the term listening several times. I don't know what the situation is in Germany, but I often get the feeling that church leaders are mostly teaching, with less of a listening presence. People often need not answers, but to have their desires and fears heard. That is why I was so sympathetic to the way the synod organizers actively communicated with the press. I think it built trust in us, so that people could be better informed about the Synod. One thing that comes to mind about you in particular is that, as a bishop, you are very active in the world of social media. Some might say that an bishop should not be on YouTube, but preach in church. What do you think about the relationship between teaching and listening?

Bischof Oster: One of the big challenges for members of the Catholic Church in Germany is contained in the question: Do we still believe the same gospel? Of course, we pray the creed together at Mass. But do we mean the same thing when we think e.g. of the Almighty Father, or when we think of the Catholic Church or when we think of the meaning of a word like salvation? I find that usually we don't really talk about our faith, we just assume that all Catholic people somehow believe more or less the same. But in fact, this is not the case. It seems to me that over the past few decades, many people have lost sight of the fundamentals of the Christian faith, or have become unclear about them, or have even completely forgotten some of them. That is why I am convinced that some concrete steps need to be taken, which is why we also talk in the final document about the importance of formation. We need to form ourselves to become a synodal, missionary Church. At the same time, we must always listen to others: we must listen to the people of God, but also to those on the periphery, to everyone. But ultimately, your and my mission is to proclaim the Gospel.

And another big question is how to link this mission to everyday life. This is not easy, because in my country, for example, many people do not dare to speak out because they feel they are not qualified to speak about their faith. Moreover, in my country, bishops and the Church as a whole is under particular pressure because of sexual abuse. It is a subject that gets a lot of attention in the media and in the society and many of us, many priests and bishops, do not really dare to speak about the revelation when it comes to questions on anthropology, especially on the matter of sexual ethics. What we have certainly learned in Germany is that we need to pay close attention to the victims of abuse. And we have done a lot in prevention work, in intervention, in bringing the truth to light, in accompanying the victims and some more. And yet, there is always more to be done.

But apart of that I am asking myself: Do we really listen to people of today so that we can communicate the faith in a way that they would understand? I think one of the greatest desiderata is catechesis, especially catechesis for adults. When we think of catechesis in our country, we usually think only of children or young people. And we have the impression that our faith education is then complete. But that's when it's just beginning, perhaps: How do I understand and live my faith today as an adult in a more or less post-Christian society? In my opinion, we have major deficits here.

Gégény: Many churches have *Lectio Divina*.

Bischof Oster: This is a common method of reading of the Bible, which is important, but there is a huge crisis in our knowledge of our faith, for example on the sacrament of confession. In the average parish this sacrament has almost disappeared. Pilgrimage places and some monasteries are still active confession places, but most churches and parishes are not. And I think we are talking about a very important sacrament, because the coming of Christ is in a very deep way about forgiveness of sins and making us children of God anew. I often talk to people. And even believers who have been going to church for 50 years often confess that the last time they went to confession was at their first communion or when they were children. And they argue that the priest then was weird or asked strange questions and so on. So they stopped going. I am asking myself then if it is a real possibility that the experience of and thinking about such an important sacrament is still at the level of a young kid – and that nobody has helped the person to get into a deeper understanding of it? How is it that we don't grow up with our thinking, our emotions, for such an important sacrament? I am convinced that there is a

great need for faith formation for adults. Now, also thanks to the tools of the new media, I am able to reach people better – and I try to do some work on proclaiming the Gospel and to introduce into Catholic teaching also for grown ups – also on the sacrament of confession and many more topics.

Gégény: Do you have enough time and energy not only to share messages on social media, but also to listen to the reactions?

Bischof Oster: I always try to take time to listen to the reactions as well. Sometimes I personally respond to a post, and I know that there are some people who have experienced some kind of conversion because of the content I have posted. That is wonderful – and yet I think that the personal dialogue from face to face is still the best way to evangelize.

Gégény: What message would you give to those who are interested in this Synod of Bishops, in the process of ecclesial renewal? Synodality is a strange word, which is perhaps difficult to understand at first sight, not only in Hungarian. How can as many people as possible join in this synod?

Bischof Oster: The Pope would probably reply that we should listen to each other, because, as he said, listening has theological dignity. As our God listens to the cries of his people, it is not just a kind of technique of listening, but a way of respecting a person and her dignity. In fact, real listening is the beginning of loving another person. We all know what it is like to just pretend to listen to the other. Sure, we listen to what one says, but at the same time we might be bored or think of the next lunch or protect ourselves from getting too much interested and so on and so forth. We are easily distracted. But if we really listen to what the other person is saying, it can give the other person the strength – not just to keep talking, but to understand herself better, to change a bit in the process of being listened to.

Has the reader ever experienced that when he has met someone who really listened to him from the bottom of his heart, he has come to know himself better than before? Well, that is in the power of listening. As churches, as bishops, as priests, as lay people, we need the ability to listen, and we need to believe that God is involved in the process. But the capacity to listen also means that we make ourselves vulnerable. Because if it would be just a way of pretending, then you continue to distance yourself from the other person. But if you are really open to listening, it also means letting yourself be surprised. You even allow yourself to be hurt. This is true listening, which is based on accepting the other person in their dignity, and beginning to love a person.

Mehr über die Weltsynode finden Sie hier: [Bischof Stefan auf der Weltsynode 2024](#)