

GERMAN PASTORS

Church in Germany collapses but cure is worse than the disease

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If there is one positive aspect of the hyper-bureaucratization of the Church in Germany and of the hated *kirchensteuer* (the tax on religions), it is the fact that every year it is possible to obtain precise and timely data on the numerical decline, with uniform

accelerated motion, of German Catholicism.

On 28 June, the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) released statistics for the year 2022, data that leave no escape: if the trend continues, within forty years the Catholic Church in Germany will no longer exist. The most striking figure is the staggering increase in the number of people who have left the Church: 522,821. To be precise, these are people who have decided to stop paying the *kirchensteuer*, the tax to be paid to support the church they belong to, which corresponds to about 9% on top of the tax they pay. This is an additional percentage and not a share of taxes that is allocated to religious denominations. In essence, a person who had to pay a tax of €3,000 would be charged almost another €300 in addition.

The clarification is important, because some of the people who have asked for their names to be removed from membership of the Catholic Church have done so not because of a rejection of the faith, but because they do not want to contribute their money to pastoral projects and initiatives that betray the faith itself. It would be interesting to understand how many of the defections - certainly a tiny fraction - belong to this category.

If the figure for 2021 was already very worrying, with around 360,000 defections (150,000 more than in 2020), last year's more than half a million constitutes a tragic increase of 44%: in just one year, the Catholic Church in Germany has lost 2.4% of its faithful, now numbering fewer than 21 million. This decrease in the number of believers, in the rigid German system, also corresponds to a loss of money: some 180 million Euros are missing from the coffers of the Catholic Church in Germany. A similar trend had also affected the Church in Austria - also characterised by a similar tax, the *kirchenbeitrag* - where more than 90,000 people left in 2022, compared to 72,000 in the previous year and almost 59,000 in 2020.

Equally disheartening is the figure for Mass attendance: only 5.7% of those 'enrolled' in the Catholic Church attend Mass - the only exception in double figures is the small diocese of Görlitz, with 13.1% -, although it is not specified how often. This figure is on the rise compared to 2021 (4.3%) and more or less in line with 2020 (the slight increase also concerns baptisms, First Communions, and weddings); but one must consider that the two-year period 2020-2021 was marked by the pandemic. In fact, if we take the pre-crisis year as a reference, we find that only one in two people attend Mass, compared to the already few who attended in 2019: 2 million in 2019, 1.186 million in 2022. The collapse also occurs in priestly ordinations: only 33 ordinations for the 28 dioceses in Germany - a little more than one priest per diocese - to which 12 priests

belonging to religious orders must be added: 45 in total compared to 65 in 2021; 30% less.

If these figures are indeed dramatic, the explanations given by 'those who count' in the Church in Germany are even more so. Dr Irme Stetter-Karp, President of the very powerful Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), **commented**: "The Church has lost faith, especially because of the abuse scandal. But currently it is also not showing sufficient determination to implement visions for a future of being Christian in the Church".

Stetter-Karp then clarified what this means in concrete terms: "Even three years of the Synodal Way cannot reverse this trend if operational implementation is now lacking". She did not miss the opportunity to argue both with the Holy See and with the four German bishops who **vetoed** the funding of the Permanent Synod Council: "The obvious crisis is pushing for change. We urgently need reforms in the Church. It is shameful that we now have to fight within the Church to ensure that things move forward". It amounts to a call to suicide.

The logic of these statements is not exactly ironclad: if the hopes of the German people were placed in the abolition of celibacy, the ordination of women, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the freeing of episcopal power for the benefit of yet another bureaucratic body, and all the other amenities promoted by the *Synodaler Weg*, we should at least have seen a galvanising effect during the years of synodal promises, a sign of reversal or at least containment of the collapse. Instead, the results show a steady acceleration in the fall towards the abyss, and Stetter-Karp's statements reveal a deepening ideological blindness.

Blindness from which the President of the DBK, Bishop Georg **Bätzing** of Limburg, is not immune: "We have posed important questions and developments in the Synodal Way. We have mostly found answers and want to promote change. I am committed to this and gladly take on this responsibility for the diocese of Limburg". The two presidents of the Synodal Way are not even remotely aware of the idea that perhaps people were made for God, that they thirst for Him and need Him, not the 'ingenious' manoeuvres of the ecclesiastical *Politburo*; that they feel asphyxiated and nauseated by the artificial 'liturgies' that are staged in the churches; that one does not defeat the rising secularisation by secularising the Church even more.

Woe betide those who think that perhaps the Church tax is a form of blackmail to which few Christians are still willing to submit; it is not difficult to think that the

de facto excommunication of those who do not pay the hefty tax - faithful deprived of the sacraments and funerals! - is a retaliation that fewer and fewer people are willing to endure, especially in the face of a hierarchy that has not excelled in transparency in its handling of abuses but then tries to divert unwelcome inquisitive glances away from its own irresponsibility, in order to direct them towards the 'structural reforms' trumpeted by the Synodal Way.

A few years from now, when the scientifically perfect cure of these pastors and leaders of German Catholicism will yield the inevitable and splendid result of the extinction of the Church in Germany, they will triumphantly claim: "The remedy has been successful: the patient has died".