

Women in pastoral leadership

**A survey of volunteers and full-time staff in parishes
in Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland,
which are led by a woman according to c.517 § 2 CIC 1983**

A brief report

carried out by the Catholic women's associations in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and South Tyrol, represented by Iva Boutellier (SKF), Angelika Ritter-Grepl (kfb), Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp (KDFB) and Agnes Wuckelt (kfd).

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1. Reason for and hypotheses of the study

The following short report is a summary of excerpts from the detailed analysis of a survey of volunteer and full-time members of Catholic parishes or pastoral areas led by women in accordance with Canon 517 § 2 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. The questionnaire was distributed in the (arch)dioceses of Basel, Feldkirch, Hildesheim, Innsbruck, Linz, Munich, Osnabrück, Paderborn, and Salzburg. The project period covered the months of October to December 2025.

The report was written by Prof. Dr. Agnes Wuckelt, lic.theol. Iva Boutellier, Mag.^aAngelika Ritter-Grepl and Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp, M.A. The data basis, methodology, and detailed results of the data analysis are not presented here. The focus is on the evaluation of the responses to the open-ended questions, in which the respondents expressed their personal impressions, thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Only aggregated data is used; therefore, tracing the results back to individual countries, parishes, or pastoral areas is not possible.

The study was prompted by a question about the effects on church members in parishes led by women. This question was raised by Sister Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ, Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican, during her visit.am 10. April 2025 in the Diocese of Innsbruck, within the Catholic Women's Movement of Austria. This line of inquiry represents a shift in perspective. While previously, in academia and practice, as well as in women's associations, the focus has been on women in leadership positions, now the voices of those who perceive and experience women as leaders should be heard.

The starting point for the hypothesis formation was therefore primarily the results of studies on women in church leadership positions[i]; on the other hand, various meta-studies were used that address the question “Do women lead differently than men?”[ii].

The increasing transfer of pastoral leadership tasks to lay men and women in the Catholic Church is based on an exception in the Code of Canon Law (CIC): In the event of a “shortage of priests,” the diocesan bishop, according to canon 517 § 2 of the 1983 CIC, can involve “a person who has not received priestly ordination” in the “exercise of pastoral care in a parish.” In the German-speaking part of the Catholic Church, where this study was conducted, there are differing approaches to this exception. [iii] While some advocate for its liberal use, others warn of the danger of making an exception the norm. For this reason, it is worthwhile to investigate the effects of pastoral leadership by women in parishes and to highlight the implications of this exception.

The central assumption, that the Church benefits from the participation of women in pastoral leadership, was operationalized using five hypotheses. The formulation of these hypotheses also incorporated the study's underlying understanding of "pastoral care." Crucial to this understanding are the three fundamental ministries of the Church, which are closely interrelated and interconnected: bearing witness to God's revelation and the

Church's mission (martyria), celebrating God's action in liturgical assembly and the communal experience of sacramental rites (leiturgia), and serving all in need (diakonia). The guiding principle of these fundamental ministries is communion (coinonia or communio), the communion of people with God, with one another, and with creation.

The hypotheses:

Basic assumption: "Through their positive and creative disruption of the familiar, women contribute to the Church generating pastoral innovation as a learning organization." - "Women diversify and differentiate the concept and face of leadership in the Church. At the leadership level, they give the Church a changed face, that of the pilgrim people of God, comprised of diverse, spiritually gifted creatures of God." (Andrea Qualbrink)	
Hypothese A)	The perception of pastoral leadership by women changes the situation on the ground. Women bring skills specifically associated with women that bring about change – in terms of atmosphere, expertise, and content.
Hypothese B)	Women in leadership positions tend towards participative leadership. This is reflected in the way they involve employees and build consensus in development and decision-making processes.
Hypothesis C)	Female leaders tend to show more empathy and place greater emphasis on building relationships with employees and the team than male leaders.
Hypothesis D)	Women in leadership positions tend towards a transformational leadership style characterized by inspiration, vision and the promotion of individual development.
Hypothesis E)	Women in pastoral leadership draw on and expand the diversity, richness, and treasure of liturgical celebrations. This enables them to actively involve parishioners and incorporate their lived realities.

2. The survey

In accordance with the five hypotheses, the questionnaire comprised five sections, each containing five statements. Respondents were asked to respond to the 25 statements on a scale from 1 (does not apply at all) to 10 (fully applies). There was also space to answer open-ended questions: at the beginning and end, as well as... The questionnaire

requested examples for five statements. The questionnaire for full-time staff differed in some statements from that for volunteers, taking into account the employment relationship between management and full-time staff. A total of 54 questionnaires were returned.

Country	Volunteer work female[iv]	male volunteer	Full-time female employee	Full-time male
Germany	7	8	2	1
Austria	10	4	5	2
German-speaking Switzerland	9	1	2	3
Total: 54	26	13	9	6

The age distribution of the respondents [v]

21-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-73
6	11	17	16	3

The volunteers involved in the study are engaged in a variety of activities; some even perform several tasks:

- as a communion minister / communion for the sick
- as an lector
- in the church choir
- in altar server work
- as Sacristan:in
- in the preparation / leading of church services / devotions / meditation / in a liturgy circle
- in preparation for First Communion and Confirmation
- as a youth leader
- in family ministry
- in the funeral service
- in the visiting service
- in the parish council / parish community council / pastoral area council, member / chair or presidium
- in synodal committees
- in the church council
- in the ecumenical movement, in the organization of religious education
- as an office assistant / as a Bus driver / responsible for technology

3. The respondents' answers

3.1 “Finally!” – “A win for everyone” – “But...”

“To my knowledge, women in pastoral leadership are still rather a rarity.” “It was high time,” because “women have already taken on many tasks in the Church... it’s good that they are also taking on pastoral leadership roles.” These voices are representative of the answers to the opening question, “What comes to mind spontaneously when you think of ‘women in pastoral leadership?’” The spectrum of answers reveals different patterns of reasoning for women assuming pastoral leadership: In a time and society where equal rights and equal opportunities were fought for (and are still being fought for), it is absolutely incomprehensible that this still cannot be taken for granted in the Church. Quite pragmatically, it is stated that “otherwise many ministries will soon no longer be possible.” Above all, however, and this is emphasized repeatedly, the pastoral leadership work of women is “absolutely necessary and important so that resources and areas of life are included as broadly as possible.” And this in turn “is a win for everyone and a beginning of the long overdue recognition of women in the church”; finally, there is also agreement that “a church without women in leadership positions will not be sustainable in the long run”.

The future viability of the Church is thus seen as linked to the fact that pastoral leadership by women is "different": "Women look at pastoral leadership from a different, more open perspective," they practice "leadership on equal terms, rooted in life": In collaboration with women in leadership, "new realities" open up, "new paths, new possibilities, unfamiliarity and respect for change." The possibility that this "new" and "different" approach can also lead to greater credibility for the Church is also considered.

However, it is precisely from this perspective that it is also seen and described that the possibility of pastoral leadership by women also highlights and exacerbates problematic aspects of the "women's question" within the Church itself. Furthermore, questions arise regarding the respective image of the Church and what it means to be Church. While the possibility of women working in pastoral leadership is consistently welcomed, it is simultaneously noted: "They still have too few rights, yet many women are involved," albeit "shaped by experiences of what is not possible for women in the Catholic Church." Great concern is expressed: "It distresses" the writer that women in the Church "still are not completely equal." It is also empathetically observed that women in leadership positions often have to endure a history "full of hurt." There are fears that women in pastoral leadership will "have a hard time." Thus, it is noted that there are "tense discussions surrounding the topic" in parishes and pastoral areas.

3.2 “Always open” – “listen first” – “find the best path together”

Hypothesis A) assumes that leadership by women leads to innovation. The first five statements in the questionnaire therefore relate to the atmosphere in the parish and the

importance of new ideas and content in relation to traditions cultivated in the community. The question "Do women lead differently than men?" is explicitly addressed in this part of the questionnaire, as is the question of the acceptance of leadership by a woman.

A high level of agreement with the statements that the leadership contributes to a positive atmosphere and introduces new ideas (71% and 81% respectively, based on a score of 10-8) seems to support the hypothesis. It is repeatedly explained that the leadership encourages new initiatives and that corresponding suggestions are frequently received from parish members. This may lead to an interaction between a positive atmosphere and desired innovation.

“Pastoral leadership means enabling”

Today, pastoral care is about "enabling." What is desired and experienced is "collaboration on equal terms," "an open ear for people and their needs," and "suggestions for redesigning celebrations in the liturgical year and other initiatives are readily embraced and supported." As an example, a worship preparation team reports: "After the pandemic, we were free to decide whether we wanted to continue [as before] or try something different. We now design a different, modern service once a month..." In some cases, "unconventional solutions" are also being considered. "Groups have been brainstorming about the future of our parish – the parish council evaluates the results so that the direction can be determined." "The leadership always strives to find the best path together," incorporating the ideas of volunteers. "Headstrong decisions" by the leadership, both volunteers and paid staff, are rejected.

“Sometimes it’s a balancing act”

It is emphasized that "change processes must be very transparent," while simultaneously striving to "address all needs." "Planned changes are discussed, and those directly affected are asked for their opinions." "Worship services are designed to meet the needs of the group." However, it is also important "to recognize the needs of those who want everything to remain as it has been—this is a balancing act." Concerns are "heard and taken seriously," but not everything can be fulfilled. "The ability to set boundaries and prioritize is essential."

"It's difficult to answer..."

The evaluation of the statement "The way she leads is determined by her being a woman" reflects a wide range of perspectives and perceptions among those surveyed in the study. While some view leadership issues, such as appointment to a leadership position, as "gender-neutral" and believe that gender is irrelevant, others do see differences. "The question of gender is outdated and no longer relevant for us. Certainly not for me." Others disagree with this statement; they cite characteristics and abilities associated with femininity to demonstrate that and how "being a woman" manifests itself in pastoral leadership.

The statement "In my opinion, leadership is shaped by personality, not gender" is frequently encountered. "It seems to me that the difference is less about being male or female, but rather about whether someone possesses leadership and interpersonal skills." However, the opinion that one "cannot and should not make stereotypical distinctions" is countered by ambivalent statements: "I see no difference whether the leader is male or female. The only point is that [female leaders] address the issues more thoroughly and with more care (solution-oriented)."

In line with this statement, several respondents bring into play specific life experiences and contexts of women, which do indeed contain a difference. This difference, they argue, influences their leadership style. Significant differences in the "biological and physical experiences" of men and women are cited. With the experiences of motherhood, family life, and employment, female leaders perceive "people's problems, fears, and worries differently." Their understanding of the situation and needs of volunteers (the majority of whom are women) is, according to several respondents, attributable to their "maternal side," "warmth," "caring," and "patience." Gender is particularly important in supporting female volunteers: "Only through personal conversation (which I'm certain I could only have with a woman) have we not yet withdrawn and continue our involvement." Furthermore, it is significant that women in pastoral leadership positions have to manage their professional demands in a "normal everyday life"—in contrast to that within a "priestly bubble."

In this latter context, it also becomes clear that when discussing the question of "being a woman" and "being a man" in pastoral leadership, "being a woman and being a priest" is often implicitly or explicitly considered. "Since the priesthood in the Catholic Church is reserved for men, this naturally has negative consequences for the competencies of female pastoral leadership (no Eucharist, no anointing of the sick, etc.)." – "It then becomes the question of 'ordination or not.' And this affects non-ordained men just as much as women, as well as people who do not identify with any gender."

"To restrict leadership to men or women is a limitation..."

Both the examples cited in the context of the significance of "being a woman" in pastoral leadership and the general statements about how respondents envision and desire "pastoral care" reveal characteristics commonly associated with femininity. At the same time, these are qualities that positively characterize female pastoral leaders in the questionnaire responses. It is the "sensitive approach, empathy, and intuition" that is highly valued, for example, "at services of the Word or funerals" - and "our parish curator possesses this talent in abundance." "For me, it even has advantages when a woman leads. They have more empathy... which was less the case with the men [on the team]." What is needed is "partnership-based dialogue," "empathic communication," and "creating spaces in which others can flourish." It requires "more emotion, more communication," "holistic perception," "an open ear for everyone," and "the ability to bring people together."

An interim conclusion: Pastoral leadership by women is perceived as innovative and conducive to innovation, both in itself and in its implementation. Competencies specifically associated with women, which women bring to pastoral care, are simultaneously considered essential core competencies of pastoral work in general. A problematic aspect identified is that women are limited in their pastoral activities due to their exclusion from priestly ordination on the basis of their gender.

3.3 “Everyone has equal rights to participate” – “Wherever possible, decisions are made jointly.”

The statements to be evaluated in the second section of the questionnaire are based on the assumption that women in leadership positions tend towards participative leadership. This is reflected in the way employees are involved and consensus is reached in development and decision-making processes. (Hypothesis B) The statement "The commitment of volunteers/paid staff is valued" received a high level of agreement (83.6% on a scale of 10-8). Similarly, the majority of volunteers surveyed agreed with the statement "Management involves volunteers in decision-making processes" (95% on a scale of 10-8).

Wherever possible, many decisions are made jointly, whether in institutionalized bodies such as parish councils or in thematically focused working groups dedicated to specific tasks. "New developments are discussed in the parish council." It is positively noted that the leadership clearly presents "the advantages and disadvantages." "Decisions that we as volunteers do not support are always thoroughly examined." "Synodal collaboration within the parish is very important to them and is actively practiced." "In our parish, volunteers are encouraged to take on tasks and express their opinions. These are always heard, and together problems are solved, new paths are explored, and solutions are developed." Everyone is heard, not only within the inner circle of the parish/parish community. Through teams or groups working on specific topics, "those directly affected are asked for their opinions, and broader circles are also involved." In this way, "the leadership actively seeks feedback and accepts suggestions for improvement."

Participate – experience self-efficacy

The areas in which volunteers are involved, or in which they make themselves available to help, are diverse. "There are countless examples, as we are involved in every topic." Discussions cover "the wishes, the possibilities, and how we should approach this with the parishioners..." For instance, the leadership team is expanded with volunteers, (safety) protocols are developed jointly within the pastoral care area, and the collaboration is characterized by "the effort to practice transparency and address all needs." "Everyone is welcome to participate on an equal footing."

It's about participation in the preparation for the sacraments: The leadership "encourages us volunteers to make independent decisions in First Communion catechesis on how we design our concept, to hold meetings without them, and thus to take on more responsibility." Or: "When deciding on the new Confirmation age, the leader assembled a team and initiated a multi-stage process. Ultimately, the team decided by consensus."

Since the leadership is "open to many forms of worship," volunteers independently plan services for the liturgical year or for special occasions (Advent, Christmas, Carnival, May devotions, Stations of the Cross) and actively participate in the celebration of Holy Thursday or Good Friday. The decision to "reinstate a blessing for couples" was discussed and agreed upon. Through the initiative of volunteer groups or individuals, a children's choir is founded, or a liturgy group is initiated to prepare children's services. "As the leader of the altar servers, my pastoral assistant was always supportive, but always gave me free rein."

"It is impossible to please everyone."

When "everyone is allowed to participate on an equal footing," and efforts are made "to address all needs," this presents a significant challenge. "Given the diversity of the volunteers, this is often very difficult" and poses a challenge for the leadership, for which they are shown "great respect." It requires the ability on all sides to deal positively with differing opinions and to remain open to new, even unusual or unconventional, ideas. The focus then needs to be on ensuring "that no one denies another's Catholicism." That this is not always easy is obvious. Limits become apparent, which can lie both in the expectation of doing justice to everyone, and in the personality of the leadership, as well as in the structures and the respective understanding of the Church.

It is lamented that in large pastoral areas, ideas are often nipped in the bud, especially when they are innovative and involve extra work. This may be due, on the one hand, to the immense difficulty of reaching consensus in large areas, and on the other hand, to the lack of clarity regarding responsibilities, which leads to many things being neglected – resulting in volunteers withdrawing. Ultimately, no universally satisfactory solution can be found when conceptions of what it means to be church lead to a division of parish members into those who want to celebrate the Eucharist and those for whom it is not so important.

An interim conclusion: The assumption that women in pastoral leadership practice a participatory leadership style is confirmed by the feedback from those surveyed. They feel highly valued in their work and involved in consultation and decision-making processes. They appreciate being able to participate independently and responsibly in shaping and developing parish life, thus experiencing self-efficacy. However, participation also reaches its limits when fundamental conceptions of what it means to be church clash.

3.4 “Sensitive handling, empathy and intuition - a highly valued talent”

The statements in the third section of the questionnaire are based on hypothesis C): "Female managers tend to show more empathy and place greater emphasis on building relationships with employees and the team than male managers." The statement "The manager shows genuine interest in me as a person" received particularly high agreement; 58% of respondents rated it "10" (fully agree), and overall, 93% rated this statement between 8 and 10. A similar result was observed for the statement "The manager actively listens and works with those affected to find solutions to problems": 76.7% rated it positively on a scale of 10 to 8. The rating of the statement "The manager appears credible and authentic" is also significant, with 90% of respondents giving it a score of 10 to 8.

In the examples cited for this section, the leadership is praised for its strong personal commitment. Even seemingly minor problems are noted and discussed. The leadership is perceived as someone who "meets the same level" as those they speak with, encouraging and supporting them. For instance, "no one is pressured to take on volunteer work, but rather approached and, if necessary, encouraged." This proactive approach to people is evident both in their behavior within the church and in their everyday lives: it has become a cherished tradition for them to "chat with worshippers at the main exit after services." They "also participate in village life," and "pleasant conversations often develop when, for example, you meet them while shopping." Conversations are characterized by "a very understanding atmosphere, and the examples shared are very authentic and personal."

“Empathy and being a woman”

The term "empathy" is not used in the statements to be evaluated in the questionnaire, but it appears explicitly or implicitly in the examples accompanying the statements: "Her sensitive approach, empathy, and intuition" not only characterize "her interactions with parishioners" but are also highly valued by people she doesn't know, for example, at funerals: She succeeds in "designing appropriate funeral services for the deceased, even if she didn't know them personally." Empathy is also demonstrated by women in pastoral leadership roles, for example, at baptisms or in their interactions with children. This is attributed to the fact that they act "from their experience as mothers." By sharing "examples from their everyday life with family and children," they create a feeling in the other person that they are understood in similar life situations (which, as explicitly emphasized by respondents, "is not the case with a priest"). Therefore, some conversations "could only be conducted with a woman."

"She lets others take center stage."

An empathetic approach to employees is also reflected in how they are treated in public. This is illustrated by the following example: "Maintaining a tradition spanning over 500 years is only possible through the dedication of numerous volunteers whose work takes

place behind the scenes." The leadership is responsible for the celebratory church service and delivers the sermon. However, "they never put themselves in the spotlight, but rather allow others to take center stage: the volunteers." The fact that the leadership doesn't stage a "one-woman show" is considered a key characteristic of their ability to interact with others empathetically and as equals.

The leadership should "listen so that it perceives how diverse and multifaceted each parish is, how it has come to be, and what makes it tick." It focuses on "those who would like to see new things in parish life, but also recognizes the needs of those who want everything to remain as it has been." With its "interest in people and their stories," it can mediate between different perspectives, so that many people can find a place that suits them." Because it looks "beyond its immediate surroundings, both in terms of time and location," it can "motivate parishioners to participate in parish life and get involved."

In contrast, experiences with male colleagues, particularly priests, are presented, who apparently do not adequately appreciate the involvement of lay people in pastoral care. As an example, it is stated that clergy did not accept the invitation to the church choir's anniversary celebration because no Eucharist, but "only a devotional service," was planned. The female pastoral leader, however, "was there and expressed how important a choir is for the parish... Her appreciation was truly genuine." "She is always herself, in my opinion."

"Bringing people together"

With similar statements, the respondents establish a connection between the leadership's empathy and credibility. "She lives what she preaches," or put another way, "Our pastoral leadership doesn't put on an act when officially on duty." She can "approach people and shows empathy for the person she's speaking to." With an "open ear for everyone, she creates connections within the community and brings people together." This includes "an interest in inviting and integrating new people." And at the same time, it's about "meeting people where they are in their faith (from little to very devout) and encouraging them to develop it further." "I maintain that relationships with believers, with members of associations... are an important factor in the success of parish work." This "meeting them where they are in their faith" and the way the pastoral leadership cultivates relationships results in a bond being formed. The staff members feel connected to both the pastoral leadership and the parish through their experiences.

An interim conclusion: The numerous statements and examples of empathetic relationship-building appear to be part of the competence spectrum of women in pastoral leadership. It would be worthwhile to examine whether this is related to traditionally feminine characteristics and abilities attributed exclusively to women. On the other hand, this could implicitly formulate a requirement for successful pastoral work per se, a requirement largely fulfilled by the women whose work is observed in this study and which is part of their understanding of pastoral care. In comparison with "male

leaders," almost exclusively priests are considered, and apparently different understandings of pastoral work are expressed.

3.5 “Encouragement and empowerment to implement new things” – “Embrace visionary ideas and support their realization”

Hypothesis D), “Women in leadership positions tend to employ a transformative leadership style characterized by inspiration, vision, and the promotion of individual development,” is supported by five statements in the questionnaire. 64% of respondents (score 8-10) agreed with the statement that leadership motivates them by exemplified a clear, inspiring vision and, consequently, fosters their individual religious development (56%, score 8-10). 79% (score 8-10) agreed with the statement that suggestions and impulses are conveyed in an understandable way. When asked whether leadership incorporates the ideas and suggestions of individuals and thus promotes innovation, the result was also positive: 67% (score 8-10) agreed.

"Listen, support, invest and implement"

Here, as elsewhere, the open responses acknowledge that the leadership is "always open to new ideas" and actively supports suggestions and requests. For example, a mother identified the need "to offer a daycare center for families with young children." This idea was supported by providing "premises, communication tools, and the time and resources of a full-time staff member." The idea has since become "an established program that also includes young volunteers," for whom a babysitting course is offered. Youth work also encourages experimentation; those in charge have a free hand but are always supported by the leadership, who are always present. These are small visions and small steps that are taken together. This includes the design of the altar area throughout the liturgical year or for special events like the "Familienfasttag." Initiated by volunteers, "one-off projects, such as the Long Night of Churches," are embraced and supported, as are "longer-term projects, such as the exchange of lectors between different parishes." For larger projects, all ideas are discussed intensively and possibilities are considered until, for example, the "procurement of new bells in an ecumenical joint project" is realized.

Use the open space

To realize visionary projects, whatever their scope, requires freedom. Firstly, this means that groups can implement their ideas and concepts independently, whether it's redesigning the parish newsletter pages in our pastoral area, creating May devotions or rosaries specifically for children, incorporating videos into services, or independently writing texts and prayers of intercession. Secondly, it is the pastoral leadership that creates such freedom. By using alternative texts in contemporary language and alternative creeds, or by celebrating services in feminine language, they also encourage leaders of Liturgies of the Word to put what they've learned into practice in seminars and

to let go of old and entrenched ways. "She strengthens one's own development." "Our parish curator encourages and supports people and has already achieved a great deal, despite only being in this role for a year." Accordingly, it is noted: "By empowering and delegating responsibility to volunteers," the "continuation of a devotional group" is ensured. The "meditation groups in the parish" also operate independently. "Unconventional solutions" are welcome, for example, in ecumenical cooperation: "Retired employees from the Protestant partner parish are involved at two locations." While some ideas for how parish life could be structured "differently" can be implemented quickly, others take time: "The parishioners want different services. The leader discussed this with the organist and with us [the leadership team]. Now new ideas have been developed where volunteers can also participate in these services." Suggestions like these broaden the scope for all involved.

That everyone finds their place?

This is precisely where limitations become apparent on various levels. Situations also arise in which not all suggestions for innovation can be (or should be) incorporated. There is the challenge of mediating between different currents of thought, as well as the need to offer a wide range of options so that many people can find a place. Can spaces be created "where others can flourish" besides those who are more oriented towards the traditional and established (or vice versa)? It is important to counteract the impression that "too little effort is being made to bring the Church into the present" and that there is a questioning of whether one can truly be "Catholic." Here, it is up to pastoral leadership to contribute its expertise and to maintain dialogue with the various groups within the parish and pastoral area.

An interim conclusion: A transformative leadership style (one not focused on the one-sided preservation of tradition) concentrates on motivating and inspiring employees to innovate and embrace change through the leader's own example. This is evidenced by numerous statements from respondents in this study, who indicated that the pastoral leader is "always open to new ideas" and "takes up their ideas and suggestions." The leader's openness in dealing with both employees and tradition serves as a model. Numerous examples are cited demonstrate the interplay between the transformative leadership of the pastoral leader and the desire and willingness of parishioners to shape the future.

3.6 "Bringing management and pastoral care together" – "a community in the footsteps of Christ"

The statements listed in the fifth part of the questionnaire serve to explore hypothesis E): "Women in pastoral leadership draw on and expand the diversity, richness, and treasure of liturgical celebrations. This makes it possible to actively involve parishioners and incorporate their lived realities." Particularly in the preceding statements and examples related to hypothesis D), it becomes clear that the respondents frequently focus on changes in the area of liturgy when discussing innovation. The interplay between the

example set by pastoral leadership and the ideas and desires of the parish or pastoral area members becomes readily apparent. Vision, innovation, and implementation depend on whether and to what extent not only new forms of liturgical celebrations are sought, but also whether both the leadership and the participants draw upon the rich liturgical treasure. This is reflected in the high level of agreement (84.7%, score 8-10) with the statement "Volunteers are involved in the preparation and execution of church services," and also in the agreement (75.6%, score 8-10) that church services and sermons are designed to be communicative. Likewise, there is agreement (76.6%, score 8-10) with the statement that the church services are closely aligned with the life of the congregation and the Gospel.

"So that everyone has room"

Because the church is small, "Communion services" are held in the parish garden "so that everyone who wants to come has a place": one example of the effort to enable as many people as possible to participate in liturgical celebrations. People should also find space in a spiritual sense. "Services are designed according to the needs of the group." For example, there are reports of "Christmas services for single parents" or that "couple blessings on Valentine's Day are deliberately offered openly to couples in a wide variety of life and relationship situations." At the same time, the importance of accessible language is emphasized: that prayer texts can be formulated by the participants themselves, that difficult theological issues are explained simply ("no theological subtleties," "no pious phrases"), and that a better understanding of central texts, such as the Creed, is facilitated through transformation. Understanding and closeness to the participants are also fostered in another example "with elements of bibliodrama or bibliolog." Biblical texts are explored in an interactive and sustainable way, for example, the parable of the talents, by motivating worshipers to become aware of their own talents. "Worship services in a feminine language" are also cited as an example: "texts shaped by feminist theology"; "feminist theological thought is present in the liturgy." By consciously creating a spiritual space for diverse groups, the pastoral leadership succeeds in fostering a sense of belonging to the parish.

"I think churches should offer very different types of worship services."

This statement, or rather summary, makes it clear how diverse worship services are in the parishes examined in the study. The entire spectrum of devotions is addressed, varying regionally. In particular, May devotions, Rosary devotions, Stations of the Cross for different target groups, Thanksgiving devotions, and other "traditional" forms of worship are held independently by volunteers. Furthermore, the study reports on meditation and prayer groups, which are also organized, prepared, and conducted independently. While these are mostly established groups that extend an invitation, there is also an effort to make them attractive and open to "people from outside." In addition, new forms such as a "Christmas praise service," which was specifically tailored to different target groups and "organized with volunteers," are mentioned. In another

example, the interviewee recalls a celebration on Holy Thursday that she [the pastoral leader] organized with a priest. All participants reported feeling as if they had actively participated in the entire service. There were prayers, songs, and a shared meal. The participants went home feeling deeply fulfilled and enriched. This example, like others, demonstrates that "the parish leader and the participating priests work together as equals. The parish leader has her place at the altar, just like the participating priest." This experience of shared liturgical celebration by both lay and ordained people is reflected in the fact that, wherever possible, all participants are included in the service: "Much is read together; it's not a one-woman show!"

“Proclamation with touching sincerity” - “She lives what she preaches”

On the one hand, it is lamented that "the parish curator is not allowed to preach at Sunday Mass because the head of the pastoral area (the priest) does not permit it." Or it is noted that "services in our parish remain largely under the control of the priests," that "services are still 'male dominated.'" On the other hand, numerous statements and examples show that the female pastoral leader does preach (even at Mass). Her sermons express a connection to everyday life in general and to parish life specifically. She also includes examples from her own experience in her sermons. "She addresses current issues and preaches about topics that genuinely concern me." Her sermons "address everyday topics, the state of the world, etc., grapple with the questions, explore them, demonstrate their presence in biblical texts, and offer approaches to the Good News. These are grounded in theological knowledge and reflection." "The sermons often stem from personal experience; they are theologically grounded, and the services are with and within the community. The future of the church as a vibrant community on a journey is discussed publicly and within the pastoral area." More than one statement confirms that many respondents experience their pastoral leader as a "spiritual person" whose faith and searching are also expressed in the worship service. The pastoral leader serves as a model of how faith and life can interact: "They live what they preach."

An interim conclusion: The theme of vision and innovation in connection with liturgical celebration is a recurring motif in the majority of the respondents' statements and examples. It is recognized that worship is at the heart of parish life, and that faith and life must be congruent. The work of pastoral leadership is measured against this standard (regardless of gender). While professional management is clearly demanded, it is not seen as separate from pastoral care (or vice versa). Pastoral care encompasses both a genuine and authentic approach to people and a spiritual attitude that finds explicit expression in the liturgy. People who perceive and understand themselves as active participants in parish life contribute their own spirituality. They appreciate the freedom that is offered to them and that they seek and find for themselves. Equally, they value the example of spiritual leadership that unites faith and life.

4. A first overall conclusion

This study is based on the question of the effects that occur when women (according to canon 517 § 2 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law) assume pastoral leadership of a parish or a group of parishes. It is based on a sample of statements and examples from a small, randomly selected group of people who are involved in parish ministry, either as volunteers or full-time staff, in the (arch)dioceses of Basel, Feldkirch, Hildesheim, Innsbruck, Linz, Munich, Osnabrück, Paderborn, and Salzburg. When interpreting the results, regional differences must also be considered: firstly, country-specific differences, and secondly, differences between the various dioceses, where the application of canon 517 § 2 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law is handled differently. For example, in the Diocese of Basel, lay people have been indispensable for years for maintaining pastoral care, leading parishes, preaching, and offering Holy Communion on Sundays. In contrast, women in the Diocese of Hildesheim, for example, have only recently been entrusted with the leadership of parishes. It is therefore obvious that in the first case, women leading parishes is perceived as the "norm," while in the second case, parishes experience this as an "exception" and react accordingly, usually very positively.

Women can lead

Both in terms of the application of the exemption and in terms of the findings of this small data collection, it can be stated that women can lead. They are appropriately trained and qualified.[vi] They are not perceived and accepted by "their" parishes merely as a "substitute solution," but with the awareness and expectation of having companions for life and faith. They are welcomed with joy because this finally represents a step towards genuine equality and equal rights for women in the Catholic Church. The longer they perform this activity and it is considered normal, the more sober a perception and evaluation of their actions sets in. Even women in leadership positions have their strengths and weaknesses, make mistakes, and can fail.

Women in pastoral leadership are changing the image of the church

The study demonstrates that the equality and equal rights of men and women, recognized in principle since the Second Vatican Council (cf. the encyclical "Pacem in terris" by John XXIII; GS 9), require steps for implementation. According to canon 208, "there is true equality among all the faithful because of their rebirth in Christ...". By involving women in pastoral care, this recognition of equality enters a new phase. Those interviewed repeatedly emphasize that this must "finally" happen. Women in pastoral leadership contribute to the Church being recognized as the People of God on a journey and as a synodal Church.

Not just "helping out," but "participating" in "pastoral care"

Women in pastoral leadership are commissioned and empowered to participate in pastoral care (cf. c. 517 § 2 CIC 1983). They fulfill their mission by inviting and empowering the staff in their parish, through a participatory and transformative

leadership style, to also understand themselves as participants. They create spaces and opportunities in which change can be shaped and in which parishioners can contribute and experience self-empowerment. This fosters the awareness of being a community that takes responsibility for and actively shapes its own life (cf. LG 31; c. 225).

The connection between faith and life - spirituality

The interviewees highlighted that women in pastoral leadership, due to their life circumstances, which differ from those of a priest, serve as role models in their own specific ways of connecting faith and life. This is evident, according to the interviewees, both in their shared daily lives and in the shaping of their faith life. Women in pastoral leadership are perceived as spiritually competent individuals who "live what they say," who "live what they preach" - whether in everyday life or in pastoral and liturgical contexts. It is acknowledged that their sermons are both relevant to everyday life in content and language, while also conveying the message of the Gospel.

Drawing from the rich treasury of liturgy

The celebration of worship is of great importance to those surveyed. They are particularly open and willing to participate in the preparation and execution of liturgical celebrations, or even to design them independently and responsibly. This involves, on the one hand, drawing on familiar forms of communal prayer, meditation, devotions, and services of the Word. On the other hand, they are also seeking new forms that resonate with contemporary people, address the challenges of everyday life in the world and within their specific life contexts, and help them bring their lives before God. Women in pastoral leadership roles provide motivation, strength, and support in this endeavor.

Except for the duties tied to priestly ordination

Those interviewed for the study are aware that, according to current doctrine, a woman in a pastoral leadership position is ineligible for priestly ordination due to her gender and therefore faces limitations in fulfilling her pastoral duties. This is viewed differently by parishioners. While some continue to consider it normal for priests (pastors) to lead a parish, others express incomprehension and deep regret. They would like to see their female pastoral leader sacramentally accompanying the sick and dying, preaching at the Eucharist, and presiding over it.

Eucharist - the summit, right and office of the whole community

Controversies surrounding pastoral leadership by women arise primarily when parishioners emphasize their "right" to Sunday Eucharist. Opposing them are those who are content with receiving Communion and for whom "the Eucharist is not so important." If the latter position is followed, the parish in question, and given the increasing shortage of priests, the entire Church in the long term, faces a serious shortage. While the fundamental functions of *martyria* (witness), *diakonia* (service to one's neighbor), and *coinonia/communio* (communion) are acknowledged as being fulfilled by women in leadership roles through their actions, *leiturgia* can only be partially fulfilled, and not fully

realized in its core and summit within the practice of Catholic life - the celebration of the Eucharist. If this development is accepted by the authorities, its essence is being withheld. The celebration of the Eucharist is "the summit, right, and office of the assembled community" (cf. SC 14: *ius et officium*). As long as this is not consistently addressed by Church teaching, the use of women in pastoral leadership is merely a matter of managing a shortage. And this is an imposition for both women in pastoral leadership and for congregations.

Conclusions and research desiderata

In the context of this study, aspects become apparent that require further and more comprehensive examination by the Church's Magisterium and in research. The clearly identifiable points are listed here:

- A follow-up study in which parish members in other dioceses can be surveyed is desirable in order to compare and validate these initial findings with further survey results;
- Review and comparison of the requirements in the different dioceses, as well as the standardization of the training and access requirements for women and lay people in general to pastoral leadership, in order not to further strengthen the development of semi-professions, since the priesthood, through its powers, continues to guarantee all the Church's functions (especially the administration of the sacraments) and thus its "professionalism".
- Since leadership in parishes is in the service of proclamation in word and sacrament, it is necessary (as a first step, or where this has not yet happened) to develop particular norms that lead to an expansion of the scope of duties of women in pastoral leadership, such as "lay preaching", official commissioning for the preaching ministry, the extraordinary administration of baptism (c.230 § 3; c.861 § 2 CIC 1983), assistance at marriage ceremonies (c.1112 CIC 1983) and the creation of corresponding training opportunities, for example in the area of homily.
- Continuation of consultations on issues of access to the sacramental office for people of all genders.

This study examines the situation and impact of women's involvement in pastoral leadership in dioceses in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. We hope this will encourage other countries and continents to evaluate the implications of women assuming pastoral responsibility.

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[i]See, for example, Qualbrink, Andrea: *Women in Church Leadership Positions. Possibilities, Conditions and Consequences of Women's Shaping Power in the Catholic Church*, Stuttgart 2019; Nadja Waibel: "Trust with Women". A biographical-empirical study of female parish leaders in Catholic parishes of German-speaking Switzerland, Munich 2025. Similarly, there are studies on women as pastoral caregivers from recent decades, such as Pemsel-Maier, Sabine: *Not Stopgaps, but Theologically Legitimized. Pastoral Care by Women in the Sense of the Second Vatican Council*, in: Pemsel-Maier, Sabine (ed.): *Between Everyday Life and Exception. Female Pastoral Caregivers. History, Theology and Current Practice*, Ostfildern 2001, 81-105.

[ii]Examples: Boerner, Sabine: *Female Leaders – Do Women Lead Differently?*, Vienna 2023; Schutzbach, Franziska: *The Exhaustion of Women. Against Female Availability*, Munich 2021; Schneider, Barbara: *Women on Equal Footing. What Gets Them to the Top and What Doesn't*, Offenbach 2012; "A Woman as Boss – Do Women Lead Differently Than Men?", available online at <https://www.lhh.com/de-de/themen/fuehren-frauen-anders-als-maenner> - Download am 20.02.2026.

[iii]For example, women have been serving as parish leaders in the Diocese of Basel since the 1980s, and the German Bishops' Conference initiated initial steps in this direction in 2013, triggered by a study day on the topic of "The Cooperation of Women and Men in the Church": cf. Bode, Franz-Josef: "And yet it moves." Steps and movements in the cooperation between women and men in the Catholic Church, in: Eckholt, Margit et al. (eds.): *Women in Church Offices. Reform Movements in the Ecumenical Movement*, Freiburg 2018, 29-38.

[iv]There was also the option to tick "diverse" for gender, but this option was not used.

[in]No age information was provided in the questionnaire.

[we]To the best of our knowledge, all women in pastoral leadership positions have completed a degree in theology (diploma, licentiate, or master's) or a related field (M.A. in applied theology, state examination). They have typically completed various second degrees (e.g., teaching, social work), and before assuming leadership of a parish, they worked as pastoral or parish assistants or held leadership positions in church institutions. A corresponding study on this topic would be desirable.