

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**

Summary

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Background

In 2025, Sister Nathalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, inquired about the impact of women-led parishes. Women's associations in German-speaking countries took up this question and conducted a survey from October to December 2025. Volunteer and paid staff members in women-led parishes in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were surveyed.

The fact that women and lay men lead parishes in the Catholic Church is based on the exception in canon 517 §2 CIC 1983. This canon has been applied in some dioceses for some time, while in others it has only recently been adopted. In German-speaking countries, there are already several publications addressing the situation of women in pastoral leadership, but the perspective of parishioners is still lacking. This was therefore the focus of the survey: How do people who are involved in a parish, whether as volunteers or full-time staff, perceive the leadership by a woman?

Type and conditions of the survey

A total of 54 questionnaires from various dioceses were evaluated. In addition to the evaluation of predefined statements, the questionnaire also included open-ended questions and the opportunity to provide concrete examples. The starting point was five hypotheses about women in pastoral leadership roles. A comparison with male leadership was explicitly not requested (although this comparison is often implicitly present). The aim was to determine how women in leadership positions are perceived by parishioners.

It was assumed that the Church benefits from the participation of women in pastoral leadership. "Pastoral" is understood to encompass the four fundamental functions of the Church: *martyria* (witness), *leiturgia* (celebration), *diakonia* (service to one's neighbor), and *coinoia/communio* (communion). It is the responsibility of leadership to bring these functions of the Church to life within the parish.

The hypotheses and results of the survey

The five hypotheses are briefly listed here, and the answers are summarized.

A) Pastoral leadership by women changes the church in various ways.

Those surveyed perceive positive changes in the church community when a woman leads it. This is largely due to competencies often associated with women, such as personal attention, openness, and the ability to compromise, as well as the specific life experiences and contexts of the female church leader. At the same time, it is pointed out that many of the qualities attributed to women are not gender-specific and that leadership is not simply "masculine" or "feminine."

B) Women in pastoral leadership tend towards participatory leadership.

The responses clearly show that people feel taken seriously and valued by women in leadership positions within the community, and that they are empowered to assume

responsibility. Both paid staff and volunteers appreciate being involved in development and decision-making processes. However, it is noted that even participatory leadership can never satisfy everyone.

C) Women in pastoral leadership tend to show more empathy and place great emphasis on building relationships.

The responses clearly show that women in leadership positions are recognized for their strong personal commitment. Their interactions with staff and volunteers are generally described as empathetic, respectful, and encouraging. Effective relationship building is considered fundamental to leadership and parish. While relationship building is often seen as a female-specific skill, it is, in the respondents' view, the foundation of any good pastoral care. Contrary experiences with male leaders (mostly priests) are cited, who do not appear to possess this skill.

D) Women in pastoral leadership tend towards a leadership style that enables transformation through inspiration, vision, and the promotion of individual development.

A transformative leadership style is not based on the one-sided and exclusive preservation of traditions but rather aims – also through its own example – to motivate and inspire both paid and volunteer staff to embrace innovation and change. This is reflected, for example, in the language used, and in providing impetus and support for utilizing various forms of freedom, whether for new ideas related to church services or worship. However, limitations also become apparent: not everyone wants or needs "new" things. In such cases, mediation and the skills specifically addressed in the sections above are required.

E) Women in pastoral leadership draw from the diversity, richness, and treasure of liturgical celebrations and expand upon them.

The questions specifically targeted perceived changes in the area of liturgy. Innovation in the parish is often located within the liturgy: whether and how not only new forms of liturgical celebration are sought, but also whether the richness of the liturgy is implemented by leadership and participants. Worship is seen as the center of parish life. The work of the leadership is measured, in particular, by how it brings life and faith together. This involves not only - certainly desirable - management skills, but above all a genuine and authentic approach to people and a spiritual attitude that finds explicit expression in the liturgy. However, divisions often arise in parishes, especially regarding matters of liturgy/Eucharist: here, the problem of the lack of ordination among women in leadership positions is particularly painful.

Conclusion

The study surveyed only a small and rather randomly selected group of community members. Nevertheless, the following can be stated:

- Women can lead congregations. They are appropriately trained and qualified. They are not perceived by their congregations as a "substitute solution," but rather accepted as companions in life and faith. Leadership by women is seen as a long overdue step toward genuine equality and equal rights in the Church. However, where women have held these positions for some time, a certain degree of dispassion can set in. Women, too, have strengths and weaknesses, make mistakes, and can fail.
- Women in pastoral leadership are changing the image of the Church towards equality and equal rights for women. They contribute to making the Church visible as the people of God on their journey.
- Women are commissioned and empowered to "participate in pastoral care" and not merely to assist. Through their leadership, they contribute to the congregation taking responsibility for and shaping its own life.
- Women connect faith and life in a specific and authentic way; they are perceived and recognized as spiritual and spiritually competent people. Women draw from the rich treasury of liturgy. They cultivate familiar forms of spirituality in a motivating, strengthening, and supportive way, while also seeking new forms that help them bring their lives before God today.
- Women are not eligible for the priesthood. While this is not a problem for some, others wish that women in leadership positions could also administer sacraments.
- Women cannot fulfill the requirement that the Eucharist should be at the heart of the community; they are not permitted to preside over the Eucharist. In some places, this leads to a division within the parish. Services of the Word and Communion services are not accepted as a "substitute" by some parishioners. Therefore, women in pastoral leadership positions are essentially a kind of "management of scarcity" if and as long as this "core" is denied to them. For the parishes and for the women themselves, this is a burden in many ways.

Thinking further

During the evaluation of the questionnaires, further aspects became apparent that should be addressed following this initial study:

- A broader survey of community members would be desirable in order to validate the responses of this study.
- Standardizing the training and entry requirements for women in pastoral leadership would strengthen their acceptance.
- Since the leadership of a congregation is in the service of proclamation in word and sacrament, particular norms would be necessary that already allow women to preach, baptize, or assist at marriage ceremonies.
- The question of access to the sacramental ministry for theologically trained women and men, a rethinking of the priesthood, must continue to be pursued with great urgency.

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