

# German bishop impressed by open debate at Synodal Path

Freiburg's Archbishop Stephan Burger could be next head of German episcopal conference

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**Stephan Burger has been the Archbishop of Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany's third-largest Catholic diocese, since 2014.**

And in these past six years the Black Forest native has emerged from being "a conservative in a good sense" – as his predecessor in Freiburg, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, once described him – to becoming one of the most credible reform-minded bishops in Germany.



Stephan Burger, Archbishop of Freiburg im Breisgau. (Photo by Patrick Seeger/dpa/picture-alliance/Newscom/MaxPPP)

Archbishop Burger, who will be 58 at the end of April, has been a firm supporter of the German Church's Synodal Path (or procedure) for ecclesial reform right from the very start.

And in the aftermath of its first plenary assembly, which was held from Jan. 30-Feb. 2 in the city of Frankfurt, he says he was deeply impressed by the open debate that characterized the three-day gathering.

## **Struggling to find the best way forward**

"There was a tough and, at times, fierce struggle to come to a common understanding and to seek a way of making the Church viable for the future, which was not at all easy," Burger told [katholisch.de](#), the official portal of the German bishops' conference.

The archbishop said it became clear quite quickly that opinions differed greatly.

For instance, there was heated controversy over the big issues, such as admitting women to Church offices. These were addressed from different theological points of view.

"But struggling to find the best way forward is part of the synodal procedure," Burger insisted.

He said the synodal assembly had no authority to decide on certain issues, such as the ordination of woman deacons.

Even if such an item were to be passed by an affirmative vote, he said, it would be up to the pope (who has already set up a commission to study the issue) to make the final decision.

## **There is no Church without women**

In almost all the 24 years of priesthood that preceded his appointment as bishop, Burger was always involved in fulltime or part-time parish ministry. He said this gave him first-hand experience of the essential contribution women make to Church communities.

"It is quite clear that there can be no Church without women," he emphasized.

The archbishop said one of his major concerns is to advocate for women to be given more jobs in curial bodies.

"Giving women responsibility wherever it is already possible is a no-brainer for me," he said.

## **Restoring the Church's credibility**

Burger, whose younger brother is the abbot of the Benedictine Archabbey of St. Martin in Beuron, was one of the first bishops to admit that the German Church was going through a credibility crisis caused by the bishops' conference's clerical abuse report of 2018.

The report led to a massive exodus of Catholics, who also complained about a backlog of Church reform. Burger immediately appealed for dialogue when talk of the need for a synodal procedure first came up two years ago.

"Dialogue with different, critical and even conflicting voices in the Church is absolutely essential for a Church which is alive and has a sustainable future, a Church in which the Gospel message is clearly visible and can be experienced," he said at the time.

The archbishop said the synodal procedure would be the ideal forum for that dialogue. But he insisted it must be in consensus with the global Church and not a German "Sonderweg" (a separate path).

## **Future president of the German bishops' conference?**

That sort of balance positions him as a viable candidate to succeed Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich as the next president of the German Bishops' Conference, who has decided not to seek a second term.

If Archbishop Burger were to be elected he would once more be following in the footsteps of his predecessor in Freiburg, Robert Zollitsch. The latter was the bishops' conference president from 2008-2014, immediately before Marx.

Burger's credentials for conference leadership have been burnished further by his efforts to find ways to restore the Church's credibility after the clerical sexual abuse crisis, something he says will continue be a "stony path."

One aspect of this is the use and abuse of power in the Church, which noted came up frequently during the first plenary session of the Synodal Path.

## **On the side of victims**

"We bishops will have to fully come to terms with the past. We must stand by the truly terrible things that happened and take full responsibility for them," he stressed.

He expressed his empathy for victims of abuse, including their impatience concerning compensation.

Burger introduced a provisional solution in his archdiocese in 2019 after hearing from victims that they were experiencing existential problems and were in financial distress.

Victims who have financial problems can now apply to an expert commission for up to 800 euros a month.

"Especially after one victim told me that, by the time he had paid his all his bills and fixed costs, there was almost no money left for food, I knew I had to help... and help quickly," he said.

*Robert Mickens contributed to this report from Rome.*