

KNR summary of talks by religious in preparation for synod 2024



Notes

In February, the Conference of Religious Established in the Netherlands (KNR) invited all its members to join in thinking and talking about the themes put forward by the National Working Group on Synodality. During each of the four regional meetings, which KNR organises each spring for religious institutes, special time was taken for synodal discussions. In addition, more than 20 religious communities sent reports to the KNR of synodal discussions around various themes. These included topics that do not fall directly under any of the themes in the national handbook of the Working Group on Synodality, but do specifically belong to religious life.

Theme 1: Our baptism as the basis of being Church

Raising awareness of the meaning of baptism

Baptism introduces us into the worldwide movement of followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It also invites us into a lifelong process of learning, contemplation, conversion and witnessing to the Good News. The times we live in call for a clear and self-conscious recognition of our vocation - as Christians, as Catholics, as monastics - and the boldness to express it. Some religious suggested celebrating our baptism date as our new birthday, as Pope Francis once suggested before. That could be a way to become more strongly aware of the meaning of our baptism.

Helping baptised people develop their vocation

A community is important and enables you to grow in faith together. Good guidance and formation in the family and faith community are important so that everyone's vocation can develop and the sense of belonging to the faith community can grow. This can be done, for example, by supporting parents more in faith education and giving more attention to catechesis for confirmands.

Explore how the notion of equality of all the baptised can be translated into appropriate responsibility at all levels in the Church

The People of God is a God-willed and blessed pluralistic faith community. We are called to embrace diversity.

The fundamental equality of all the baptised (which is different from equality) invites sincere openness and willingness to give and receive everyone's wealth. All the baptised have their own gifts that they can use within the Church. To be explored is how appropriate responsibilities can be entrusted to baptised persons at all levels in the Church.

Take the Spirit as the guiding principle and support 'inspired' initiatives

Some religious indicate that, instead of being baptised, it seems to them more fruitful to use the Spirit who unites as a guiding principle. It is the Spirit who makes alive and liberates, and is greater and more surprising than we can imagine. In contacts with non-believers and the unbaptised, religious often experience a deep spiritual affinity. Although secularisation has increased enormously, Christian values have remained clearly present in society, but without a church label: one can think of food banks, refugee work or environmental groups. These religious call for openness to and support for all kinds of new initiatives being taken by new religious communities and 'city monasteries'. One group of missionaries wrote: "All these new shoots we see emerging from the outdated stump of religious life in the Netherlands and there we find clues for the Church of tomorrow."

Theme 2: Formation in a missional Church

Listen to people in a spirit of openness and trust

The mission of the Church consists of proclamation and witness. The two - teaching and preaching, words and deeds - belong together. But many religious say that love for fellow human beings is the deepest ground. By doing good, you bear witness to God's goodness and love for all people.

Many religious have come to the conviction that 'being missionary' means first and foremost looking and listening respectfully to what is going on in people. Meeting each other in such a spirit of openness and trust shows that God wants to be close to every person.

Approaching each person as a bearer of Christ

Forming the body of Christ together means approaching and accepting the other as bearer of Christ in weakness and vulnerability, as much as in strength and talents; knowing that the other is and will always remain a secret. It requires the same open attitude that religious want to convey to guests and visitors in their hospitality.

New insights can sometimes be found precisely outside our comfort zone: especially in contacts with people who are marginalised. A community of sisters remarked: "Was it not the encounter with a Canaanese woman that led Jesus to also have mercy on the lost sheep outside the house of Israel?" (Matt 15:21-31).

Sharing from the wealth of tradition

Many people seek meaning in their lives and connection with others. In this, our faith has much to offer. The challenge is to draw from the richness of our tradition what can be meaningful for people today. For example, as a Church we can show people in this hectic world the importance of silence; of wonder, and encounter with others and with God.

To be enriched by experiences from across the world church

The presence of foreign missionaries in the Netherlands and contacts with fellow religious from other countries means that many religious have a concrete sense of being part of a world church. Dutch religious point to the lively way of celebrating fellow religious from other countries: "We can learn from other cultures where the form of the liturgy is not so rigid and subdued. With great involvement of all present, more active participation, more spontaneous which makes for happy, contagious celebrations."

Differences in beliefs can also be challenging. For instance, theological views and insights or devotional practices are not always well understood and accepted back and forth. It is worth exploring how, as a Church, we can accommodate cultural diversity, learn to listen to each other and thus discover what is positive in the way others experience Church and liturgy.

Deploy church buildings as 'silent witnesses' of faith

Monasteries and church buildings are beacons in the landscape and built environment. Even if they have been given a different function, they can be 'silent witnesses' of God's presence, so to speak, and raise questions in people's minds. Ensure that accessible and appropriate information is and remains available to non-believers, interested parties and seekers, with opportunities to meet the 'living stones' (e.g. in a parish or religious community).

Theme 3: Participation in a welcoming Church

Give love priority over rules

Many religious acknowledge that they have the fundamental experience of being part of the Church 'for better or for worse'. But they sympathise with the pain of loved ones who have broken with the Church because they were excluded from participation in the sacraments because of divorce, homosexual relationship or the like. "If others are excluded, you cannot feel welcome yourself either" was said. Love should take precedence over rules and laws, it was said. Keep talking to people. Isaiah's words should be guiding: increase the space in your tent.

The key elements of a welcoming Church are closeness and attention

The first sentence in Benedict's rule is: 'Listen!' First of all, the abbot/abbess needs a listening ear so that the community can grow in community-ness.

Welcoming is above all an attitude, with proximity, attention and listening as key elements: being close to people and their experience, paying attention to people on the margins, listening to each other as well as to God.

Providing space for people to actively contribute

The space to get actively involved is essential for a welcoming Church. We are Church together. Inviting and welcoming is a task of all Church members. Also pastoral care is not only a task of ordained pastors but of every believer. We are each other's shepherd.

Working towards openness and flexible structures that meet today's needs

Openness is mentioned as a prerequisite for a living community. Wherever people interact - so also in the Church - there is a need to discuss honestly what bothers you. In case of disagreement, it is important to listen, respect each other and forgive.

In addition, Jesus' words, "Where two or three are together in My name, there I am," indicate that being Church need not be tied to a particular structure or to a complex organisation. A flexible structure is needed, in line with the needs of the moment.

Greater focus on spirituality of religious

Religious sometimes do not feel properly seen by church leadership. This is felt, for example, because the archdiocese's website on vocation focuses only on priestly and deacon ordination. Members of a monastic community noted: "At the 'official level' of the Church, it sometimes feels like we as religious are somewhat out of touch. The focus often seems to be exclusively on parish life, while religious spirituality can bring out other dimensions."

Theme 4: Women in the life and mission of the Church

Recognising the experiences of women in the Church

Despite the different experiences of women religious, common patterns are clearly discernible. The role and space allotted to women within the Church appear to be highly dependent on the person of the pastor and/or bishop. Sisters of an international congregation: "First of all, the many positive experiences each has had in her life and work. The trust received and the appreciation of people we have been privileged to work with: parishioners, Catholic and Protestant colleagues, fellow sisters, pastors and priests. But negative experiences we ourselves or girls and women in our working environment have also been numerous and sometimes heartbreaking: being ignored by the parish priest or bishop; not being recognised or heard; being treated disrespectfully and sometimes transgressively." While women religious are truly grateful for the work done by many permanent deacons, priests and bishops, they also signal the pain that many women suffer from the Church. The synodal process can be a path to recovery by listening to what women have to say and acknowledging their experiences.

Priest training should focus on awareness, self-reflection, development of empathic abilities and learning to connect with people's experience, rather than putting too much emphasis on rules and laws.

More input from women at all levels will enrich the Church

In society, we see women occupying an increasingly equal place at all levels. The qualities traditionally considered 'feminine' such as care, empathy and warmth that they bring can enrich the Church. Of course, many men have those qualities too, but by working together you can achieve a better balance and a warmer atmosphere in which people can recognise and feel welcome. Many religious (f/m) advocate broadening opportunities for women to get involved at all levels of the Church. They should also be equipped to do so.

Ordination of women and the need for a fundamental discussion on ministry

Women committed to the Church, including theologically very educated women, experience that they have little say due to the power priests have by virtue of their ordination.

Ordaining women would create a better balance of power between women and men in the Church.

Opinions do vary among religious in this regard. Some are not concerned about this. Others think that women should at least be ordained deacons, still others see no reason why they cannot be ordained priests. This also notes that a fundamental discussion is needed about the ministry, about power and service. Women cannot be meant to behave clerically.

It is suggested by some that differences should be possible by region, out of respect for different cultures and needs in different contexts.

Better cooperation between dioceses, parishes and monasteries as 'members of one Body'

Women religious in a contemplative community note that the clerical aspect is more in the background for them. One group of sisters wrote: "We are allowed to live in an autonomous convent with an ecclesiastically recognised form of life and profession, and experience recognition and appreciation for our way of life from many quarters. We are aware that this gives us an edge over other women in the Church."

One community described their vocation "on the one hand as a silent and hidden presence in the heart of the world, and on the other as a welcoming and inviting space for people to join. Our sisterly living together in and from Christ is also an essential part of our mission and witness, and from there our dealings with all those we meet."

Some issues specifically raised by monials

- As a women's community, monastics rely on priests for the ministry of the sacraments, which are increasingly difficult to obtain. One community noted that "the great emphasis on the Eucharist, source of our life despite the fact that it cannot be celebrated daily, sometimes seems to be in tension with the great value of the encounter of God in the prayer of the Hours and spiritual reading - the two pillars of our life. In the institutional Church at the national level, this essential element seems almost absent in its communication and practice."

- Differences in church laws for monks and monastics raise questions.

- It is noted from several communities that there is a lack of mutual knowledge, understanding and cooperation between the different life forms and ranks of the Church, especially between parishes and monasteries. "Where we do not know about each other or even see each other as competitors, opportunities for growth remain unexploited, even though we are all members of the one Body of Christ, called to support and build each other up," he said. A vital local Church also includes monasteries, which in turn depend partly for

their survival on parishes, families and schools cultivating a breeding ground in which vocations can thrive."