SUMMARY

The article examines the sources of legitimacy of local church leadership against the background of the modernization of Western society. The empirical question as to the extent to which the forms of legitimation offered by the Catholic Church are endorsed by parish members at the grass-roots level, forms the point of departure for a discussion based on an empirical study carried out in Germany and the Netherlands. The assumption that modern and ecclesial thinking are interwoven in the consciousness of Catholics suggests that modern forms of legitimation will be more readily accepted than the traditional forms. The empirical results, however, clearly show that it is no longer possible to speak of a single source of legitimacy of church authority. While the Catholics surveyed expressed a preference for a church leadership that meets the criteria of modern society, they did not reject the traditional and even the charismatic foundation of local church authority. These results give cause to reflect on how the legitimation of parish leadership might be reconstructed so as to provide a firm foundation for the credibility and acceptance of the Church in a modern society.

Thirty years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, the debate over the identity of the Catholic Church rages on. The unbroken interest of theology in ecclesiological questions is evidenced not only in the various systematic examinations of this topic in recent years (Kehl 1992; 1996; Werbick 1994; Hünermann 1995), but practical theology too offers a specific contribution to this debate with the outline of a contextual ecclesiology (Van der Ven 1993). That there is also a very great desire for discussion at the grass-roots level of local pastoral work is shown by the petitions for referenda on ecclesiological issues organized by the church members in various European countries in recent months (Franz 1996; Listl 1996).

An essential point of the otherwise often very dissimilar theoretical discussions about the identity of the church is its relationship to the phenomenon of modernism and postmodernism (Kehl 1992, 165-210; Van der Ven 1993, 18-31; Gabriel 1996; Werbick 1994, 129-132). Modernism can be defined epigrammatically, with reference to sociologist Max Weber, as the process of the disenchantment of reality, guided by the desire to solve all problems by rational means (Weber 1985, 308). At the same time, however, the relation between
church and modern society must be considered not only as a constant rearguard action by the church, but also and above all as a positive challenge. The church, it is argued, must seek out new forms of existence if it is to endure under the conditions of a modernized society (Kehl 1992, 188-210). Intra-church conflicts too are related to the problematic and unresolved relation between the church and modernity (Kehl 1996, 59-64). Moreover, the concept of modernism comes into play wherever the phenomenon of the popular church and its decline are under discussion (Werbick 1994, 129-132). And finally it is also used to describe the societal context within which the church is called on to carry out its general function of religious communication (Van der Ven 1993, 17-65).

Many discussions about the relationship between modernism and the church take as their starting point the issue of church leadership. Theologians and sociologists ask themselves whether a hierarchical form of leadership as practised in the Catholic Church still has a place in a modern society. The criticism is not new. It clearly dominated the ecclesiological debate in the sixties and early seventies, which centred on the authority of the Pope (Küng 1970) as well as the most appropriate leadership structures for the local congregations. Numerous examples can be found in the theological literature in the immediate wake of Vatican II (Congar 1965; Küng 1976; Rahner 1972). Here, as in the literature of the following decades, the question of leadership was and continues to be debated in connection with divergent ecclesial models from the New Testament and the early church, on the basis of which conclusions have been drawn with respect to present-day practice at the local level (Schillebeeckx 1985, 73-126; Döring 1986, 36-52; Henau 1989, 51-75).

It is this problem of leadership of the church at the local level in the age of modernity that we wish to examine in the present article. By taking an empirical-theological approach to this question we establish a connection between the two aspects of the aforementioned ecclesiological discussion. Specifically, we are interested in finding out how Catholics, as members of a modernized society, think about the legitimation of parish leadership. In other words:

*What forms of legitimation of parish leadership exist in the consciousness of Catholics and how are these valued in light of the modernization of our society?*

The aim of this empirical-theological approach is to make a contribution to the ecclesiological debate referred to at the start of this article by answering this question. In this way we hope to shed light on the sensus fidelium with regard to the question of local church leadership. The orientation of the question towards the lowest level of the Catholic Church, i.e. the parish, is to be under-