

German Bishops Push Reform to Welcome Divorced Catholics

Germany's Roman Catholic bishops plan to push ahead with proposed reforms to reinstate divorced and remarried parishioners despite a warning from the Vatican's top doctrinal official, according to a senior cleric.

Stuttgart Bishop Gebhard Fuerst told a meeting of lay Catholics at the weekend that the bishops had already drafted reform guidelines and aimed to approve them at their next plenary meeting in March.

Readmitting twice-married Catholics to full membership in the Church is a pressing concern for Pope Francis, who has called a special synod of bishops next October to consider ways to do this despite Catholicism's rejection of divorce.

Fuerst was the most explicit of several German bishops to rebuff Archbishop Gerhard Mueller, head of the Vatican doctrinal office, who last month ruled out any change after Freiburg archdiocese in Germany unveiled its own reform proposals.

"We want to approve new guidelines at our plenary meeting in March," Fuerst told the Central Committee of German Catholics, an influential group of lay faithful, on Saturday in Bonn.

Catholics who divorce and remarry in a civil ceremony are barred from receiving Communion under Vatican doctrine that applies to the worldwide Church. Many of them see this as a sign of rejection and drift away from the faith.

Fuerst said this complaint was one of the most frequent that German bishops have heard since they launched a broad drive to consult the faithful following a shocking wave of revelations in 2010 about sexual abuse of minors by priests.

“Expectations [of reform] are great, and impatience and anger are greater still,” he said, adding that a working group of bishops has been debating the issue since then.

The Argentine-born pope addressed the issue in an outspoken news conference on his return flight from Brazil in July, saying the Church had to review its overall approach to failed marriages and would do so at the synod of bishops next year.

Catholicism teaches that marriage is indissoluble and can only be ended by an annulment, a Church ruling saying that proper conditions for marriage such as free will or psychological maturity did not exist when the knot was tied.

Freiburg archdiocese in southwestern Germany seemed to jump the gun last month when it released a guidebook saying a priest could readmit remarried divorcees to the sacraments if they proved to him their faith and commitment to the new union.

When the Vatican doctrinal chief Mueller ordered Freiburg to withdraw the guidelines, Munich Cardinal Reinhard Marx—one of the pope’s top eight advisers—retorted that he “cannot end the discussion” and the debate would continue “on a broad scale.”

Fuerst said the bishops drawing up the national guidelines would not issue a blanket pardon because Jesus himself had ruled out divorce. But they would propose ways for faithful couples to gain readmission to the sacraments.

The German Church, an influential voice in the Catholic world, has debated this issue since the 1980s.

When three bishops proposed reform in 1993, the Vatican’s then doctrinal watchdog Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—the future Pope Benedict—also rejected it.