News



An assistant prepares ciboria of hosts for Communion before Pope Francis' celebration of Mass marking the feast of Pentecost in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 4, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — May 3, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Vatican has asked Germany's Catholic bishops to adapt a proposal to allow non-Catholic spouses to receive communion so it might satisfy objections from a minority of the country's prelates, who questioned the doctrinal legitimacy of the initiative.

In a press release May 3 after meetings in Rome that day between six German bishops and four curial officials, the Vatican said the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had asked the prelates "to find, in a spirit of ecclesial communion, a possibly unanimous outcome."

Pope Francis asked the delegation of German bishops to come to Rome last month after three-quarters of the prelates approved the development of pastoral guidelines for determining situations in which a non-Catholic spouse married to a Catholic could take Eucharist in the church.

Seven German bishops had expressed disagreement with the move, writing to the head of the doctrinal congregation, Archbishop Luis Ladaria, and the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Kurt Koch, asking whether the bishops' conference had authority to issue such guidelines.

The May 3 press release does not give indication of whether Ladaria or other Vatican officials agreed or disagreed with the bishops' conference's authority on the matter.

"During the course of the meeting ... Archbishop Ladaria illustrated that Pope Francis appreciates the ecumenical commitment of the German bishops and asks them to find, in a spirit of ecclesial communion, a possibly unanimous outcome," the release states.

Among issues discussed in the encounter, states the release, were: "the connection of the question with faith and pastoral care, its relevance for the universal church, and its juridical dimension."

"Archbishop Ladaria will inform the Holy Father about the contents of the dialogue," the release concludes. "The meeting took place in a cordial and fraternal atmosphere."

The Catholic Church generally reserves the possibility of taking Communion to its members, holding that the sharing of the sacrament is a sign of unity in the faith.

Some non-Catholic spouses say, however, that not being able to take Communion alongside their partner creates a sense of exclusion.

Three years ago, Francis suggested that Lutherans married to Catholics could personally discern whether to take Catholic Communion. In response to a question from a non-Catholic spouse during a visit to Rome's Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2015, the pope reflected on the nature of Jesus' words at the last supper: "Do this in memory of me."

"I ask myself: Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of a path or is it the *viaticum* for walking together?" he asked, using a Latin term for food or provisions along the journey.

Advertisement

Francis has also spoken about the need for what he calls a "healthy decentralization" in the Catholic Church, and has asked for a deeper consideration of the theological status of bishops' conferences.

The German bishops taking part in the May 3 meeting included: Munich and Freising Cardinal Reinhard Marx, the president of the bishops' conference; Cologne Cardinal Rainer Woelki; Munster Bishop Felix Genn; Speyer Bishop Karl-Heinz Wiesemann, president of the bishops' doctrinal commission; Regensburg Bishop Rudolf Volderholzer, vice-president of the doctrinal commission; Magdeburg Bishop Gerhard Feige, president of the bishop's commission for ecumenism; and Jesuit Fr. Hans Langendorfer, secretary of the bishops' conference.

Besides Ladaria and Koch, the Vatican officials taking part included Bishop Markus Graulich, undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts; and Fr. Hermann Geissler, an official at the doctrinal congregation.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

A version of this story appeared in the **May 18-31, 2018** print issue under the headline: Vatican asks German bishops to agree on Communion.