Vatican



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The leaders of the German bishops' conference say they feel "obliged to stride forward" with their proposal to create national guidelines on allowing Protestants married to Catholics to receive Communion, even after the Vatican's doctrinal chief asked them to set the matter aside.

"It is important for us that we are on an ecumenical quest to achieve a more profound understanding and even greater unity among Christians," the permanent council of the conference says in a June 27 statement. "We consider ourselves to be obliged to stride forward in this matter courageously."

The statement, which appears to indicate a tone of defiance not seen from a national bishops' conference towards the Vatican in years, also says the president of the conference, Munich and Freising Cardinal Reinhard Marx, met recently with Pope Francis to discuss the issue.

During that meeting, it states, Marx "was able to clarify" that a May 25 letter from the doctrinal chief informing the Germans of issues with their proposal "provides guidance and a framework for interpretation."

The statement is responding to a letter sent to the German bishops by Cardinal-designate Luis Ladaria, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of

the Faith. In that letter, which was leaked to an Italian journalist, Ladaria told the Germans that Francis had decided their proposal had "not matured enough to be published."

The cardinal-designate said in a short press briefing June 26 that his letter was meant to be a "call to reflection" and not a "hitting the brakes" on the proposal. He called the issue of inter-communion "a problem which must be studied in a broad situation, the whole church, and not only a local problem."

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

Although the text of the German guidelines has not been made public, it is widely thought to consider situations in which a Lutheran married to a Roman Catholic and regularly attending Mass with the Catholic spouse could receive the Eucharist.

The issue affects Germany more than most other countries, as the Christian community there is almost evenly split between Catholics and Lutherans.

In their statement, the German bishops say they are concerned about providing pastoral care for "inter-denominational married couples who have a serious spiritual need to receive the Eucharist."

The text states that Marx was also able to clarify with Francis that the proposed national guidelines would serve as "an aid to orientation" for individual bishops in using their authority under canon law to allow Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church to receive the Eucharist if "grave necessity urges it."

During a press conference on the flight back to Rome after his visit to Geneva June 21, Francis said he had given permission to Ladaria to write his letter to the Germans to ensure their proposal "heads down a good path."

Appearing to reference canon 844, the pope said that while the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law allows for a local bishop to decide to give Communion in special cases it does not allow for national conferences to do so.

That canon however gives authority to the "diocesan bishop or conference of bishops."

The German bishops' statement says the entirety of the bishops' conference will reconsider the inter-communion guidelines proposal at its next general assembly, to take place in September. The conference first approved the proposal in February by a more than two-thirds vote.

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