News



Bishop Stefan Oster of Passau, Germany, is pictured during an interview in Freising, Germany, Nov. 11, 2015. Prelates in Germany and Austria have united to support Pope Francis in response to a former papal nuncio's demand for his resignation. (CNS/KNA/Lukas Barth)



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Prelates in Germany and Austria have united to support Pope Francis in response to a former papal nuncio's demand for his resignation.

In Austria, Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna published a column Sept. 7 in the weekly newspaper Heute with a strong message backing the pope, calling the pontiff a "fighter against injustice and exploitation" who "stands against sexual abuse in the church with great determination."

"This criticism comes from circles in the church who want to get rid of this pope as soon as possible," said Schonborn, leveling criticism at unnamed Vatican officials.

He said the pontiff's opponents are exploiting the opportunity to criticize him during a time when he is experiencing difficult days.

"I thank God for such a compelling shepherd," the Austrian cardinal concluded. "Thank you, Papa Francesco!"

The cardinal's comments follow a call by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, former papal nuncio to the United States, for Pope Francis to resign for allegedly ignoring sanctions Pope Benedict XVI had placed on then-Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick for sexual misconduct.

In Germany, four bishops previously at odds in the debate over communion for civilly divorced and remarried Catholics were unanimous in their call for Catholics to remain loyal to the pope.

"It is time to stand behind the pope and support his efforts for clarification, restoration and prevention," Bishop Peter Kohlgraf of Mainz wrote on his Facebook

page Sept. 3.

"It cannot be that Catholics are only loyal to the pope as long as he represents their opinions. Without loyalty to the pope, it is not possible to be Catholic," Kohlgraf said.

Bishop Stefan Oster of Passau, expressed strong support for Francis in a blog post on his personal website, titled, "Why I believe Pope Francis."

Oster admitted to personally questioning the pope's teachings because of traditional Catholics wondering "whether the magisterium, faith, liturgy and the call to conversion are not getting too raw a deal."

"I must admit that I am familiar with such questions since I have asked them myself," he wrote.

He said he analyzed debates between liberal and traditional Catholics to determine whose side the pope might be on. However, based on the pope's writings, he said, the pope is neither a liberal nor a conservative.

Oster made a detailed study of Francis's teachings, reviewing the texts of "Evangelii Gaudium" ("The Joy of the Gospel"), "Amoris Laetitia" ("The Joy of Love"), "Laudato Si, on Care for Our Common Home," and "Gaudete et Exsultate" ("Rejoice and Be Glad").

He identified four key teachings of the pope: personal love for Jesus, love in the family, love for the environment, and the universal call to holiness.

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"Looking more closely and less anxiously, one can see that the Holy Father does not decide for one way or another way. He searches much more for the path of depth, honesty, genuine love and credibility," Oster said. "Ecclesia semper reformanda." ("The church must always be reformed.")

Oster said he sees Francis as someone who "wants to consistently lead the church on a path of renewal that is neither liberal nor conservative, but one of a spirit of holiness, a spirit of the Lord in the present, which becomes a witness for the world and a place where every person -- and the world -- can experience God's transformative love and become more healed in his heart."

"I am thankful to Pope Francis for his service and for his witness!" he concluded.

Such views were echoed by Bishop Gebhard Furst of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, who announced his support for Francis Sept. 3 on Twitter.

"I follow him on the path to renewal of the church, which he has consistently followed since the beginning of his papacy," Furst said.

Bishop Wolfgang Ipolt of Gorlitz also expressed confidence in the pope's leadership, telling KNA, Germany's Catholic news agency, in early September that it is easy for others to cast blame while not having to take responsibility.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 21-Oct 4, 2018** print issue under the headline: Bishops in Austria, Germany, India rally around pope after Vigano letter.