News



Jonathan Luxmoore

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Oxford, England — February 12, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic theology faculties in Germany have accused the church of restricting their freedom and warned that theology's "scientific credibility" could be damaged by reinforced rules and procedures.

Germany's assembly of Catholic Theology Faculties said in a statement that theology's credibility depended on promoting "Gospel interaction with contemporary issues" in dialogue with other philosophies, as well as on scientific freedom, which "should not be perceived as a danger."

The theologians said they felt Pope Francis had encouraged them in the foreword to the January 2018 apostolic constitution "Veritatis Gaudium," which took effect in the 2018-2019 academic year, updating previous 1979 guidelines. They said a six-point foreword to the 23,000-word text reaffirmed the importance of ecclesiastical

faculties and universities in "these demanding and exciting times," and called for "ways of presenting the Christian religion capable of a profound engagement with different cultural systems."

The foreword was followed by 94 articles of general and special norms for theology, and 70 further norms for applying "Veritatis Gaudium" in practice, and the theologians said they found these restrictive.

"These norms present the outdated picture of a lawful, strictly controlled theology, based solely on a culture of obedience through a close-knit approach of rules and regulations," the theologians said.

In their statement, the theology faculties said there was "a barely resolvable tension" between the formulations in the foreword and the "concretized norms" in the main text, "whose content and application contrast strongly with the view of theology's task as a motor of change."

As examples, they cited the document's "restrictive rules" under Articles 38 and 73, for the granting a "nihil obstat," or teaching license, to university theologians by the church, as well as continued requirements for a profession of faith with "deference to the church's magisterium," instituted in the late 1990s.

Advertisement

The statement said greater responsibility for teaching theology should be given to "local church structures," in line with subsidiarity and collegiality principles, as well as to comply with free-speech provisions in Germany's constitution.

"We see ourselves as committed to the path taken in German-speaking areas — to conduct theology, answering questions of our time in the language of our time," the assembly said in its statement.

In a Feb. 11 interview with Catholic News Service, the faculties chairman, Schonstatt Fr. Joachim Schmiedl, said a key problem in Germany was posed by the Vatican's authority to confer canonical titles and degrees to theology faculties forming part of the state university system.

He said procedures had been set in 2011, but added that Vatican officials and some German bishops had shown a growing tendency to oppose theology appointments, especially in the case of female candidates.

"We feel the pope has encouraged us to discuss issues such as the female diaconate, while Vatican departments have sought to prevent such discussions in public," Schmiedl said.