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No quick "fixes" or organizational change will renew the Catholic Church in Germany, Pope Francis said; what is needed is a spiritual renewal and Gospel transparency.

In a letter to "the pilgrim people of God in Germany," published by the Vatican June 29, the pope said efforts to eliminate tension solely by "being in order and in harmony" would ultimately "numb and domesticate the heart of our people and diminish and even silence the vital and evangelical strength the Spirit wants to give us."

"You would have a good ecclesial body that is well organized and even 'modernized' but without soul and evangelical newness; we would live a 'gaseous' Christianity without evangelical bite," he wrote.

In late September, the bishops' conference released a study that revealed an estimated 3,700 cases of sexual abuse reported in the German church from 1946 to 2014.

The statistics prompted outrage in the general public, and the German bishops held several meetings to discuss reforms; some of the suggestions included reviewing the church's discipline on priestly celibacy, reviewing church law, promoting more women in church administration and reviewing Catholic teaching on sexual morality.

German Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising, president of the bishops' conference, said March 14 that the church "needs a synodal advancement," and he pledged to create "formats for open debates" and to "bind ourselves to proceedings that facilitate a responsible participation of women and men from our dioceses."

In response, Pope Francis emphasized that taking a synodal path is a process that must be guided by the Holy Spirit with patience and not a "search for immediate results that generate quick and immediate consequences but are ephemeral due to the lack of maturity or because they do not respond to the vocation to which we are called."

In trying to resolve problems and shortcomings, the pope warned, there is the temptation to think that "the best response would be to reorganize things, to make changes and 'fixes' that would allow the life of the church to be put in order and in tune."

But a true transformation, the pope continued, cannot be made as a "reaction to external data or demands," even those that are valid, but must flow from the identity of the church itself.

The church must adopt an attitude that "seeks to live and make the Gospel transparent and breaks with the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the church in which everything proceeds normally but in reality, faith wears out and degenerates into pettiness," the pope said.

"True transformation responds to and calls for demands that are born of our being believers and of the church's own evangelizing dynamic," he said. In other words, "it calls for pastoral conversion."

Evangelization is key, the pope said, but he warned against a temptation to use it as a "tactic of ecclesial repositioning," an act of conquest, as something that is adapted "to the spirit of the times" or as a way to "recover habits or practices that give meaning in another culture context."

Evangelization, he said, is a path of discipleship that leads men and women toward conversion and is a way to "recover the joy of the Gospel, the joy of being Christians."

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"It is true, there are hard times, times of the cross, but nothing can destroy the supernatural joy, which adapts, transforms and always remains," he said, comparing it to the flicker of light "that is born of the personal certainty of being infinitely loved, beyond everything."

The church's primary concern must be to share this joy with others, he said, especially those "who are lying on the doorstep of our churches, in the streets, in prisons and hospitals, squares and cities."

With the rise of xenophobia, indifference and individualism, the pope added, the church must connect the Lord's passion with those who suffer and "awaken in our communities, especially in young people, the passion for his kingdom."

Catholics in Germany also must look to the saints "next door" who exemplify true holiness and can help the church avoid ideological manipulation.

"Brothers and sisters, let us care for one another and be attentive to the temptation of the father of lies and division, the master of separation who, in pushing us to seek an apparent good or a response to a given situation, in fact ends up fragmenting the body of the holy and faithful people of God," the pope said.

In a joint statement released after the pope's letter was published, Marx and Thomas Sternberg, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics, the coordinating body of official German Catholic lay organizations, said they were encouraged by Pope Francis' words, which will be taken "as an orientation for our common action."

Agreeing with the pope's assessment, Marx and Sternberg acknowledged the growing distrust of the Catholic Church in Germany and said that "the success of the synodal path is also a spiritual orientation that must not be exhausted in structural debates."

"For the process that lies before us, Pope Francis urges us to listen to one another in a new way, so that, as part of the universal church, we may place ourselves at the

service of faith with all our creativity, spirituality and passion," the statement said.