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A Catholic archbishop has rejected a church instruction barring him from public appearances and vowed to go on denouncing "heresy and sectarianism."

"Christ gave me authority through the church to proclaim the truth, and I'll do so as long as I live," said retired Archbishop Jan Lenga, 69, who lives in Lichen, Poland, after serving in Kazakhstan.

"I won't yield to degradation by those whose own statements and actions are entangled with heresy and sectarianism," he said. "What right do they have to recall what pertains to the church when they themselves have never upheld it?"

Bishop Wieslaw Mering of Wloclawek ordered Lenga to stop preaching, celebrating Mass or speaking to the media, after the archbishop accused Pope Francis of "spreading untruths" and refused to include the pope in prayers.

In a Feb. 25 interview with the internet-based Gloria TV, the archbishop said Mering's order would have "no effect," since no one in the Polish church had authority to prevent him from speaking out.

He added that he had no wish "to belong to a church run by Protestants, Islamists and Jews," and believed his critics should "form their own church, rather than usurping power in the Catholic Church."

Meanwhile, a senior member of Lenga's Marian order said bishops were empowered by canon law to decide who could conduct services in their dioceses, but added that the archbishop had left the order's jurisdiction after his 1991 consecration as bishop.

"Archbishop Lenga is living at Lichen as our guest, at his own request and that of the Vatican, with a monastic roof over his head," Father Piotr Kieniewicz, secretary of the Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception Warsaw-based province, told Catholic News Service Feb. 27.

"He is subject solely to the Holy Father, and if Bishop Mering was licensed by the nuncio to take some decision about him, that is their business."

Lenga, born in Ukraine, trained secretly in Soviet-ruled Latvia and Lithuania and was ordained in 1980, later becoming newly independent Kazakhstan's first bishop. He was named bishop of Karaganda in 1999, ministering mostly to Catholic families deported to Central Asia under czarist and communist rule.

After leaving Kazakhstan in 2011, he co-signed several letters urging Francis to clarify marriage and family teachings after the pope's 2016 encyclical "Amoris Laetitia." He also signed a May 2019 "Declaration of Truths" alongside U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke.

In a book-length interview, circulating in Polish on YouTube, he said he still recognized Pope Benedict XVI as pope and had dropped the "usurper and heretic" Francis from his prayer intentions after concluding he was spreading "untruths and sins" and "leading the world astray."

In a Jan. 20 Polish TV interview, he said "many bishops and cardinals" lacked a "deep faith" and had adopted "an attitude of betrayal and destruction" by seeking to "correct Christ's teaching," adding that current confusion in the church indicated "the Antichrist is here."

In a Jan. 22 statement, the Polish bishops' spokesman, Father Pawel Rytel-Andrianik, said Lenga's statements could not "in any way be identified" with the Polish church or bishops' conference, adding that it was "a matter of regret" the prelate was "appearing in the media and leading the faithful into error."

In a Feb. 22 open letter, Mering said he had tried "to ease growing tension" in two unsuccessful meetings with the archbishop and would leave a "final decision" on his fate to the Holy See.

"I'm acting in the name of the church, which has a hierarchical structure — we cannot tolerate a situation in which this archbishop omits the Holy Father's name from the canon of the Holy Mass," the bishop said.

"My request that he stop speaking to the media is to prevent an evil sensation. Some will praise the archbishop, while others will be scandalized by the divisions he's initiated."

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