News

People walk through the Christmas market on the square in front of the historic Town Hall in t

People walk through the Christmas market on the square in front of the historic Town Hall in the northern German city of Bremen before it opened Nov. 22, 2021. (CNS photo/Anli Serfontein)

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Some of the world's most iconic Christmas markets in Germany and Austria were forced to close shortly after or just before they opened, as COVID-19 infections surged across Europe.

After the 2020 pre-vaccine, lockdowned Christmas season with no Christmas markets, the German-speaking countries were looking forward to a return to pre-COVID-19 times.

Christmas markets belong to German Advent social life and normally run from the week before the first Sunday of Advent until a day or two before Christmas Eve. This is where they meet up for a drink or a bite to eat while buying handicraft or typical local specialties as gifts.

Compared to the nearly fully vaccinated southwestern European countries like Portugal or Spain, the German-speaking countries of Austria, Switzerland and Germany have a much lower vaccination rate, with 68% of Germans and 66% of Austrians vaccinated.

Some Catholic bishops, like Berlin's Archbishop Heiner Koch, have announced only vaccinated people or people who had recovered from COVID-19 would be allowed into Christmas church services.

The German states of Bavaria and Saxony announced Nov. 19 they would close all Christmas markets Nov. 22. Many markets in northern and western Germany opened under stringent conditions for the first time since 2019.

Barely an hour after one of the world's most beautiful Christmas markets — the tourist magnet Salzburg Christkindlmarkt — opened on the square in front of Salzburg's Catholic cathedral Nov. 18, regional politicians announced a full lockdown would being Nov. 22. Salzburg is one of Austria's COVID-19 hot spots.

"The lights will continue to burn, but the stalls will be closed," Wolfgang Haider, chairman of the Salzburg Christkindlmarkt association, told the Austrian ORF broadcaster afterward. He estimated the financial loss to be at least 2 million euros, which will hit the exhibitors. "These are pure operating costs," not profit, he added.

During the news conference announcing the lockdown, a local journalist got up to tell the city officials that, on the market square, many of the hundred Christmas market stall holders were openly crying after they received the news. Many of these stalls are family-run small businesses.

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A day later, it was announced that the whole of Austria would go into a three-week lockdown — and that, for the second consecutive year, all Christmas markets, hotels and retail stores would have to close until Dec. 13; it was unclear whether they would be able to open again.

In Germany, the Bavaria and Saxony regulations hit some of the oldest and most traditional Christmas markets in Germany. Saxony has the lowest vaccination rate in Germany — just 58% of the population is fully vaccinated, and it is home to many

anti-vaxxers.

Holger Zastrow, organizer of various Dresden Christmas markets, told the local MDR broadcaster: "I am very disappointed. I have never experienced anything so ignorant and insensitive."

Zastrow said he was worried that the Christmas culture in Saxony was being lost. He said he believes the area is the authentic motherland of Christmas. He said he sees Christmas not in terms of religion, but in terms of century-old customs.

In Berlin, only a few big markets opened Nov. 22 under stringent conditions. Since the 2016 terrorist attack on Berlin's Breitscheidplatz, the Berlin markets have had concrete barriers and an increased deployment of security personnel.

In Osnabrück, Bishop Franz-Josef Bode called on people get vaccinated against COVID-19. He opened church premises for public vaccination campaigns.

"Getting vaccinated against coronavirus is a moral obligation for everyone — unless there are health reasons for not doing so. We have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but also to our neighbors," the bishop said. "Those who do not get vaccinated should consider that they are harming the weakest in society."

On Nov. 22, the permanent council of the German bishops' conference met in Würzburg. Afterward, it issued a statement saying bishops were witnessing "the progression of the fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic taking place at a pace that is almost unstoppable. The incidence figures, new infections and deaths are reaching frightening proportions."

"We strongly urge Catholics and all people in our country to get vaccinated, to the fullest extent possible. Vaccinating in this pandemic is an obligation of justice, solidarity and charity. From an ethical point of view, it is a moral duty. We must protect ourselves and others," the statement said.