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Activists carrying a rainbow flag and a banner with an image of Mary and the Christ Child atte

Activists carrying a rainbow flag and a banner with an image of Mary and the Christ Child attend the second "Marzahn Pride" march in Berlin July 17, 2021. (CNS photo/Axel Schmidt, Reuters)

by Associated Press

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BERLIN — More than 120 employees of the Catholic Church in Germany publicly outed themselves as queer on Monday, saying they want to "live openly without fear" in the church and pushing demands for it to allow the blessing of same-sex couples and change its labor rules.

A group of 125 people — including priests, religion teachers and administrative employees — identified themselves as backers of the initiative titled "#OutInChurch — For a church without fear."

In a document last March, the Vatican's orthodoxy office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said Catholic clergy cannot bless same-sex unions because God "cannot bless sin."

The document pleased conservatives and disheartened advocates for LGBT Catholics around the globe. But it drew notable pushback in Germany, which has seen discussion on hot-button issues such as the church's teaching on homosexuality as part of a formal process of debate and reform.

Bernd Moenkebuescher, a pastor from western Germany who helped initiate blessings for same-sex couples last year, told the dpa news agency that the

participants in the new initiative were inspired by a public coming-out by 185 actors in Germany last year.

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The initiative is calling for all LGBTIQ who work for the church to join up, and appealing to bishops to give its manifesto public support. It assails the church's "discrimination" against same-sex relationships and argues the church should make clear "that LGBTIQ+ people, whether living alone or in a relationship, are blessed by God."

The initiative especially calls on church officials to allow queer people to come out at work if they're working for a Catholic institution without having to fear that their work contracts will be canceled.

"The #OutInChurch initiative demands ... to change the church's labor law in such a way that a life in accordance with one's own sexual orientation and gender identity, also in a partnership or civil marriage, does not lead to exclusion from tasks and offices nor to dismissal," supporters of the initiative wrote.

The German Bishops' Conference welcomed the initiative, according to dpa.

"I would like to welcome this on behalf of the German Bishops' Conference as a sign that we are working to ensure that such a climate of freedom from fear must prevail and arise in our church," Aachen Bishop Helmut Dieser said on the sidelines of consultations of the Bishops' Conference Permanent Council in Würzburg.

No one, he said, should be discriminated against, devalued or criminalized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"We have an image of man that tells us that the person is unconditionally loved by God," Dieser added.