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Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, celebrates Mass during t

Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, celebrates Mass during the third Synodal Assembly in Frankfurt Feb. 4, 2021. (CNS photo/Julia Steinbrecht, KNA)



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WASHINGTON — The head of the German bishops' conference responded to an open letter from more than 70 bishops from four continents and expressed surprise at some of what they said — and did not say.

Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the of the German bishops' conference, thanked the bishops for their April 11 letter and said he was glad that the bishops were taking the process of Germany's Synodal Path seriously. But he assured them that

"the Synodal Path in no way undermines the authority of the church, including that of Pope Francis, as you write."

In a letter dated April 14 and published on the website of the German bishops' conference, the Limburg bishop reminded Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila of Denver and other letter signers from North America, Africa, Italy and Australia that the decision to embark on the Synodal Path was to confront the systemic causes of the abuse and its cover-up. He said it was "our attempt to renew a credible proclamation of the Good News."

"This occasion and context is particularly important to us, but, unfortunately, it is not mentioned at all in your letter. I would be very surprised, however, if you and the signatories of the open letter did not see the importance of the necessity to face the question of abuse as a church and to draw consequences for the church and its structures."

Bishop Bätzing said it was important to speak openly about power and abuse of power in the church.

"Euphemistic dressing up, as you try to do in your letter, does not really help," the bishop said. "Unfortunately, such abuse of power — also by episcopal authorities — is not only a thing of the past, but is also happening in the present and leads to massive violations of the rights and personal integrity of the faithful and religious. The participation of the faithful in decision-making at all levels of ecclesiastical action (this is what we mean when we speak of separation of powers) will in no way damage the authority of the hierarchical office, it will give it a newly founded acceptance among the people of God, I am convinced of that."

The open letter to the Germans was signed by 49 bishops from the U.S., four from Canada, 19 Africans, one Italian and one Australian, Cardinal George Pell. Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, South African Cardinal Wilfred Napier and U.S. Cardinal Raymond L. Burke were among the signers. The letter noted that "events in one nation inevitably impact ecclesial life elsewhere."

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It raised seven criticisms, including "failing to listen to the Holy Spirit and the Gospel," relying more on "sociological analysis and contemporary political, including

gender, ideologies" than on Scripture and Tradition, and being too focused on "power" and "autonomy."

"The Synodal Path process, at nearly every step, is the work of experts and committees," the letter said, calling the process "bureaucracy-heavy, obsessively critical, and inward-looking."

"In its effect, the Synodal Path displays more submission and obedience to the world and ideologies than to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior," it said.

The Synodal Path includes forums in which questions are discussed and assemblies at which people from the forums report back and proposals are discussed and voted on. Some texts not only must receive approval of more than two-thirds of all delegates, clerical and lay, but also must have the approval of more than two-thirds of the bishops.

Bishop Bätzing said the entire synodal process was organized around Mass and prayer. He noted that because of the process, it "sometimes requires concentrated work on texts and resolutions, embedded in discussions, publications and media formats."

He referred the letter signers to the Orientation Text on the Synodal Path website.

"The Synodal Path, as described in detail in the Orientation Text, is not oriented to short-lived sociological theories or secular ideologies, but to the central sources of knowledge of the faith: Scripture and Tradition, the magisterium and theology, as well as the sense of faith of the believers and the signs of the Gospel interpreted in the light of the Gospel. This fundamental orientation, in careful theological reflection, determines the deliberations of the Synodal Path."

Because of this, he said no one can think that the Catholic Church in Germany is in danger of becoming schismatic.

Concerns about the Synodal Path creating divisions and responding to pressures of the times are some of the main issues cited by Nordic and Polish bishops, who have voiced their concerns publicly.

But repeatedly, Bishop Bätzing has said the German church was doing exactly what Pope Francis asked of the nation's Catholics in 2019, that is, embarking on a "spiritual journey in asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

The German bishops are keenly aware of the concerns of other conferences about the direction their Synodal Path is taking. Bishop Bätzing has admitted that there were highly divergent opinions on issues such as blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples or the ordination of women as deacons or priests.

The German Catholic news agency KNA reported he pledged that the bishops would submit all the synodal reform decisions that can only be implemented at the universal church level to the worldwide synodal process launched by Pope Francis in preparation for the 2023 Synod of Bishops on synodality. Bishop Bätzing reiterated in his April 14 letter that some proposed changes must be put before the universal church.