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Leaders of the second Synodal Assembly are pictured during its opening session in Frankfurt, Germany, in this Sept. 30, 2021, file photo. Participants will face a packed agenda and heated debate at the upcoming fourth plenary assembly of the Synodal Path reform project on the future of the Catholic Church in Germany. (CNS photo/Julia Steinbrecht, KNA)



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Participants will face a packed agenda and heated debate at the upcoming fourth plenary assembly of the Synodal Path reform project on the future of the Catholic Church in Germany.

At their meeting Sept. 8-10 in Frankfurt, the approximately 230 delegates will discuss 14 papers, reported the German Catholic news agency KNA. These include texts on church sexual morality, the role of priests, the participation of women and the mandatory celibacy of Catholic priests.

Another text advocates the establishment of a synodal council in the Catholic Church in Germany. Made up of bishops and laypeople, it would be a permanent "advisory and decision-making body." That and other plans discussed in the Synodal Path have encountered strong opposition from more conservative Catholics and are also being viewed critically in the Vatican.

In a statement issued in July, the Vatican said the Catholic reform project in Germany "does not have the faculty to oblige bishops and the faithful to assume new forms of governance and new approaches to doctrine and morals." An agreement first needed to be reached at the level of the universal church, it added, citing a possible "violation of church communion and threat to the unity of the church."

In an interview with KNA, Julia Knop, a theologian from Erfurt who is a member of the Synodal Assembly, called for reforms.

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"Church teachings and structures did not fall from the sky, they have grown historically. That is why they can also be developed further. If they no longer prove their worth in faith and life, they must be corrected. That is because they are not an end in themselves," she told KNA.

On the other hand, Bishop Bertram Meier of Augsburg warned the Synodal Path not to act too fast. In an interview with the catholic website katholisch.de, he said it was legitimate "that we in Germany address issues that affect us very closely -- especially after the chronic abuse scandal." But he said it was problematic to seek changes at the universal church level with synodal resolutions at the national level ahead of the worldwide Synod of Bishops on synodality convened by Pope Francis, planned for October 2023.

With regard to the need for reform debate within the church in Germany, Meier said: "Reassurance is something different than rushing ahead."

The German bishops' conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics launched the Synodal Path in 2019 in the wake of Germany's clerical abuse scandal. The process 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.

The Synodal Path is scheduled to end with a fifth plenary assembly in March in Frankfurt, according to current planning.