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A LGBTQ flag hangs on St. Paul's Church in Munich 13, 2022. (CNS photo/Lukas Barth, Reuter

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by Catholic News Service

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People who work for the Catholic Church in Germany and live in a second marriage or in a same-sex partnership will in most cases no longer have to brace for their dismissal under new employment guidelines being discussed by the country's bishops.

The bishops adopted the more liberal guidelines for the approximately 800,000 employees of the Catholic Church and the Caritas social services organization, reported KNA, the German Catholic newsagency.

Germany's constitution allows religious and ideological communities a far-reaching right of self-determination, including employment requirements.

A central concept of the revised "Basic Order of Church Employment" is that in the future, an employee's private lifestyle would no longer be a reason for dismissal.

"The core area of private life is not subject to any legal assessment and is beyond the reach of the employer," the German bishops' conference announced in Bonn Nov. 22. "This legally inviolable zone in particular covers the form of personal

relationship and the private sphere."

All employees can represent a "church that serves the people" regardless of their specific tasks as well as of their origin, religion, age, disability, gender, sexual identity and way of life, the bishops' conference said.

According to the guidelines, religious affiliation can be a criterion for recruitment if it is required for a particular job, such as pastoral care, preaching or management that shapes the Catholic profile of the institution. All employees will continue to be expected to identify with the goals and values of the Catholic institution under the guidelines.

Apart from exceptional cases, leaving the Catholic Church remains an obstacle to employment or a reason for dismissal. Activity deemed hostile to the church is also an obstacle to recruitment and to being allowed to remain in the job.

The reform was decided by the heads of the 27 German dioceses meeting in Wuerzburg, KNA reported. The bishops' conference said the plan received "the required majority," meaning more than two-thirds of the bishops' approved the measure.

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In the previous amendment to the guidelines in 2015, three bishops had reservations and delayed implementing the changes. The new version is initially only a recommendation to the dioceses. Each diocesan bishop maintains the responsibility to implement it or not.

Under the 2015 reform of the Basic Order, the focus was on the individual employee and his or her personal lifestyle. The new Basic Order finds the employer and the managers responsible for protecting and strengthening the Catholic identity of the respective institution.

That identity is to be shaped by guiding principles, a Christian culture of organization and leadership and by communicating Christian values and attitudes -- not by the private lifestyle of the employees, the guidelines state.

The German Caritas Association, the country's largest Catholic social welfare organization, expressed relief at the changes and called them overdue. It is crucial that the new regulations be put into effect in all dioceses as soon as possible to ensure uniformity in employment conditions throughout Germany, the association said.

"We want to show that all people of goodwill are invited to be Caritas together with us, regardless of age and gender, of skin color and sexual identity, regardless of whether they are married, single or divorced after remarriage," Eva Maria Welskop-Deffaa, president of Caritas Germany, said.

Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the lay Central Committee of German Catholics, praised the reforms as an "overdue step."

"I now assume that the scrutiny and the sanctioning of people in church employment are a thing of the past at this point," she said. "Instead, the church itself takes responsibility for ensuring that the institution is perceived as Christian. This paradigm shift is important."