Opinion
Guest Voices
Two men light votive candles in a church.

A gay couple lights votive candles at a Catholic church in Essen, Germany, Oct. 30, 2021. A majority of German bishops voted March 10 in favor of same-sex blessings. (CNS photo/KNA/Harald Oppitz)



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After more than three years of consultations Germany's "Synodaler Weg," the Synodal Path reform project, ended with a bang: The church in Germany is calling for — and implementing — far-reaching progressive reforms. On March 10, a Frankfurt assembly approved blessings for same-sex couples and approved asking Rome for the ordination of women deacons.

But will these reforms become reality, especially if the Vatican opposes them? Yes and no.

It's been a long and arduous road for the Germans. When they announced their national Catholic reform project in 2019, no one would have expected the waves they would cause. Not only is the conservative Catholic world up in arms at the German ideas, but even the Vatican told them explicitly not to continue down the path they have taken.

Same-sex blessings, the right for women to give homilies, women's ordination and the acceptance of gender theory found a vast majority in the synodal assembly, which consisted of more than 200 delegates, half bishops, half lay people. Even more than two thirds of the bishops signed off on the reform ideas.

That doesn't mean all these changes will all become reality right away — in fact, some might never happen. In a way, the German fight for a progressive church has just begun.

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One man might be responsible for the win on same-sex blessings, and he's not even German. Johan Bonny is bishop of Antwerp in the Belgian region of Flanders. He was one of the official observers of the synodal assemblies in Frankfurt.

At the final meeting, held March 9-11, he took to the podium and told the audience a very interesting story. Everything the Germans were fighting for, he said, he and his brothers in Flanders already had started to put in motion — with very little controversy or news headlines. Flanders has been allowing blessings for same-sex couples since 2022, and not even the pope or the Vatican has intervened, though they were informed, Bonny said.

Bonny's story surely changed some minds at the synodal assembly and helped to garner the needed majorities. He said the Flemish bishops went to the Vatican last autumn for their scheduled ad limina visit and presented the pope with their idea.

"Is that your unanimous wish?" Bonny said Francis asked. It was. The pope neither condoned nor vetoed their idea, Bonny said, so they began to implement same-sex blessings in Flanders basically straightaway.

Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics and co-chair of th

Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics and co-chair of the Synodal Path, and Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, attend the fifth synodal assembly in Frankfurt March 9. On March 11, the bishops approved blessings for same-sex couples and approved

asking Rome for the ordination of women deacons. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Heiko Becker)

Just days before the Flemish bishops met with the pope, the German bishops' conference also had their ad limina consultations with the Roman curia. Even though same-sex blessings were not reported as a topic of the meetings, the atmosphere must have been very frosty.

According to texts later released by the Vatican, several cardinals essentially called for the suspension of the Synodal Path. The German bishops declined. Several of them later spoke of being talked to like "little schoolboys," which they were not willing to accept.

Bonny, the Belgian bishop, mentioned this treatment during the assembly in Frankfurt. "Perhaps the Vatican officials were a bit tired after the Germans," he joked, implying this may be a reason for the smaller resistance to the Flemish reform ideas.

Of course, the bishops' conferences in Germany and Flanders are very different. The German conference has almost 70 members; the one in Flanders has eight. The Germans also are known to take a more thorough, and often more confrontational, approach than other countries.

The German Synodal Path has been discussing the idea of same-sex blessings publicly for more than three years. In this time, they worked out a profound theological memorandum to go with their proposal. The Flemish bishops apparently didn't make such a big deal of it. They came to an agreement amongst themselves, went to Rome and started informal talks with the curia. And only then did they present Francis with their idea and went public.

German Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising attends the fifth synodal assembly in

German Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising attends the fifth synodal assembly in Frankfurt March 9. During the three-day final assembly, bishops discussed issues including blessings for homosexual couples, ordination of women, a relaxation of mandatory celibacy and more church involvement for lay people. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Heiko Becker)

Germany's approach has been much more confrontational from the beginning. When in spring 2021 the Vatican published a document prohibiting same-sex blessings, a group of more than 100 prominent German priests went ahead anyway, very publicly. The Vatican's sour mood toward proposals from Germany shouldn't surprise anyone.

So now Germany officially allows same-sex blessings. Are they starting them tomorrow? No. As always with the Germans, it's a bit more complicated. They will work on liturgical and pastoral guidelines on how to handle these blessings. A committee is supposed to take three years for that.

Even then these blessings won't be implemented everywhere. It was clear from the beginning that the votes of the Synodal Path would not be binding for any local bishop. Germany has 27 dioceses; four diocesan bishops voted no, three abstained from the vote. In a number of dioceses, then, no one can make the bishop implement same-sex blessings.

Asked what he expects to happen in these dioceses, the president of Germany's bishops' conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Bätzing said there's not a single diocese where the faithful will not ask for these blessings.

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The Vatican could again intervene. The Germans have now explicitly gone against the will of Rome's 2021 letter, with a formal vote supported by a large majority of the bishops. What will happen if the Vatican intervenes again? "I trust in the Holy Spirit," Bätzing said.

We will see how and when these blessings will be implemented in Germany. The situation isn't as clear as some headlines suggest. One thing is clear though: This decision will have consequences far beyond Germany. If a small bishops' conference like Flanders is making such a change, it's easy to ignore. If a large and influential church like Germany does, it won't be as easy.

The German church is financially, politically and theologically influential. They put down a strong vote with a sound theological base. As the survey for the ongoing worldwide synodal process showed us, the Germans are not alone in their wish for reform. Now everyone who is hoping for a more progressive church has a powerful

ally in their corner.