Vatican



The Rev. Martin Lintner (RNS screen grab)

Claire Giangravé

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — July 11, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A recent Vatican decision to not allow a progressive theologian to become the dean of a theological university in Italy highlights the fractures within the Catholic Church over sexual morality while also hinting at divisions inside the Vatican itself.

The Rev. Martin Lintner was selected by its faculty to become dean of the prestigious Theological University of Bressanone, located in the traditionally German-speaking region near the Austrian border. The appointment of Lintner, a professor of moral and spiritual theology at the seminary, was also met with approval by the local bishop. But the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education refused to issue the permission required for Lintner to take on the role, the university announced on June 26.

The congregation released no explanation for its decision and has not replied to a request by Religion News Service for comment. Theologians and academics around the world responded with confusion and dismay at the Vatican's decision to prevent the appointment of the theologian.

The local bishop, Ivo Muser, said he was informed that the Vatican had denied the appointment due to Lintner's previous "publications on questions relating to the sexual morality of the church." In a recent statement, Muser said the current dean, Professor Alexander Notdurfter, will keep his position until August 2024. "This time will allow for the calm necessary to further reflect together on the issues that arose and that involved other Vatican departments," Muser said.

Lintner has spoken in support of reconsidering the Catholic Church's controversial ban on artificial birth control enshrined in the 1968 encyclical Humanae Vitae by Pope Paul VI. Lintner has also written in support of blessing same-sex couples, a position promoted by members of the synodal path in Germany despite the Vatican's veto on the subject.

Lintner upheld the dignity of same-sex relationships in an article published in 2020 on the website of Catholic LBGTQ+ advocacy group New Ways Ministry and has offered reflections in favor of ceremonies to bless same-sex couples.

While the decision is officially up to the Congregation for Education, some believe it was the Vatican Department overseeing doctrine that made the ruling on Lintner.

The Congregation for Education and Culture was born from the union of two other departments under the leadership of Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonca, who is considered a close friend of Pope Francis. Francis' involvement in halting Lintner's appointment remains unclear.

Related: Vatican's veto of theology dean in northern Italy sparks international criticism

The decision regarding Lintner's appointment highlights the tensions between the Vatican and the synodal path in Germany and elsewhere. Meant to promote a vision for a less hierarchical church and to empower lay Catholics, the multiyear synodality process has resulted in appeals from many Catholic faithful and clergy around the world for female ordination, LGBTQ+ inclusion and clergy accountability. Lintner's rejection underlines Pope Francis' struggles in enacting the synodal vision and the reform of the Vatican Curia.

"The Vatican's decision regarding me didn't just cause surprise but also frustration among many faithful," Lintner wrote in a statement published on the university's website on July 3. "It raises doubts on the good outcome of synodality," he added.

Bishops and lay individuals will gather in Rome in October for the Synod on Synodality, where they are poised to discuss the major questions facing Catholicism today, from the role of women to power structures in the church. The synod is Pope Francis' brainchild and born from a three-year consultation of Catholics at the parish, diocesan, national and continental levels. It aims to revolutionize the way decisions are made in the church and to create a more open and inclusive way of communicating and engaging with the faithful.

According to the Catholic Theological Faculty Association, the decision on Lintner "contradicts the synodal spirit invoked by Pope Francis" but also shows how Catholic academics remain under the yoke of the Vatican offices and departments known as the Vatican Curia. "It runs counter to the concern for academic freedom and

undermines the self-government of Catholic faculties and Catholic universities," the group said in a June 27 statement in support of Lintner.

Lintner also spoke of an "institutional problem" with regard to the imposition by the Vatican departments for doctrine and education over universities and theologians. "I hope and desire that my case will contribute to creating a constructive relationship of trust and dialogue between the Magisterium and academic theologians, among dicasteries and theological associations, faculties and theological studies," he said.

"It's very important that there be dialogue" between the Vatican and theologians, said theologian Dawn Eden Goldstein in an interview with RNS on Thursday, July 6, adding that "there have been many cases in the past where people claimed there had not been dialogue and they had not been heard."

Advertisement

This Vatican imposition has been interpreted as a power play, especially by some members of the German church, who have experienced their fair share of Vatican interference. The International Society for the Study of Moral Theology in Germany called out the Congregation for Education's decision for being "inadequate and unjustified," while criticizing the lack of transparency as a "demonstration of curial power."

The church in Germany, with its credibility undermined by sexual abuse scandals, began its own synodal path in 2019. The series of conferences aired a desire by faithful in the country for a church that reflected the values of society today to foster inclusivity and accountability. As the church became more vocal with its call for modernization, Pope Francis sent a letter urging caution and discernment. When German priests began to bless same-sex couples, the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, or DDF, answered with a resounding no, stating the church "cannot bless sin."

Vatican experts at the time were told Francis had not been happy with the decision by the doctrinal department and were promised the pope would soon take action. On Saturday, Francis completed his reform of the DDF by appointing a close collaborator to head its theological section, Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández.

According to Goldstein, Fernández's appointment is "good timing because it does indicate something hopeful: that there is now someone in leadership who does favor dialogue."

In a recently published interview, Fernández said he intends to lead "in my own way." He said he is open to discussion regarding the ordination of women or the blessing of same-sex couples "given the pope's call for synodality."

But the decision to appoint Fernández can also be interpreted as a warning signal to papal opposers in the Vatican Curia. In a 2016 interview with Italian Vatican journalist Massimo Franco, Fernández said the "Roman curia is not an essential structure" of the church and the pope could just as well lead the church with only the college of bishops at the service of the people of God.

"Fernandez might not find it easy to change entrenched attitudes," Goldstein said, "but thankfully the pope has his back."

A version of this story appeared in the **July 21-August 3, 2023** print issue under the headline: Halted appointment of theology dean rocks the Vatican and beyond.