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An older white man wearing glasses and a clerical collar speaks from behind a table and in fr

Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki of Poznan, Poland, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Jonathan Luxmoore

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The president of the Polish bishops' conference has bitterly criticized demands for liberal change by the church in neighboring Germany and urged the pope not to allow them to dominate the Rome Synod on Synodality.

"Awareness of the power of truth sustains my hope for the ongoing synod -- that it won't be in any way manipulated or used to authorize German theses which openly contradict Catholic Church teaching," Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki of Poznan said in a letter to Pope Francis released Nov. 14.

"There's a risk the scientific claims being cited are wrong, as happened with another once-popular theory about racism. If doctrinal competence were granted to bishops' conferences or continental assemblies, then such theses would be considered Catholic -- and perhaps imposed on other conferences, despite their obviously non-Catholic character," the archbishop said.

The 1,000-word letter was published ahead of the Polish bishops' Nov. 20-21 fall plenary, which is expected to focus on reactions to the October Rome synod.

At the close of the Oct. 4-29 synod, a report summarizing the discussions was released. What follows now is a yearlong period of reflection for the whole church, which will culminate in the second and final synod assembly in late 2024 on the same topic of synodality.

In his letter, Gadecki said he had been alarmed by a 150-page document circulated to synod participants, setting out German demands, as well as by suggestions in the synod's working document, or "Instrumentum Laboris," that "discernments by a single episcopal conference" might carry "authentic doctrinal authority."

"The authors of this document seem so ashamed at how German bishops reacted to reports of sexual abuse by clergy that they've decided to start a moral and legal revolution in the universal church -- however, it seems this wouldn't be an evangelical revolution, but one inspired by left-liberal ideologies," the Polish bishops' president told the pontiff.

"The main themes are change to the church's order and teaching on sexual morality, and ordaining women to the diaconate and priesthood … [that] the church should become as similar as possible to the liberal democratic world, which exemplifies humanism," he said, criticizing the German church's "Synodal Path."

Germany's Catholic Church sent six delegates to the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome and was widely believed to have influenced the agenda through its own "Synodal Path" discussions, launched in December 2019. The path, running till 2026, resumed in Essen Nov. 11, although several German bishops, including Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne have pulled out after opposing its liberal demands.

In his letter, Gadecki said the German "Synodal Path" had called on the church to adopt the "political system" and "democratic bureaucracy" dominant in the West,

through lay supervision over clergy, decision-making transparency and a "power structure parallel to the hierarchy," while also demanding "the blessing of non-sacramental unions, including same-sex unions" on grounds these were not sinful.

"On the contrary, it's the church's teaching which is sinful, as well as unmerciful and discriminatory -- it makes the church, according to the authors, responsible for the persecution and suicide of transgender people," the Polish archbishop said.

"In reality, relationships between people, including sexual relationships, are traditionally subject to moral evaluation in the church's teaching. ... Love does not justify everything or make everything good. In the Catholic approach, we treat every person with respect, but not every human choice," he said.

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Bishops from Poland's predominant Catholic Church are widely seen as upholding conservative Catholic teaching in Europe.

Meanwhile, a Polish lay delegate to the synod told OSV News the archbishop's open letter signaled Polish "public misgivings" over reform demands in the wider church, but said he doubted any Polish bishop would openly dissent from papal decisions, such as by publicly issuing critical questions, known as "dubia."

"The Polish church believes any changes must be pastoral, rather than doctrinal," said philosophy professor Aleksander Banka, a member of the Polish church's Lay Apostolate Council.

"But 'dubia' aren't a proper way of communicating with the Holy Father, since they apply pressure and force him to reply on issues requiring delicacy and care. Any bishop with questions or doubts can resolve these through direct talks with the pope. Having shown much greater public loyalty to the Holy Father and church teaching than their German counterparts, I don't think Polish bishops would go public this way," he said.

Gadecki's letter follows a ruling released Nov. 8 by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith that transgender persons "may receive baptism under the same conditions as other faithful," if it would not cause scandal or confusion among other Catholics.

In his letter, the Polish archbishop said German reform demands also had included not recording a child's gender on baptismal certificates, and providing transgender people with access to the sacraments, including priesthood and consecrated life.

"The entire teaching of the church on gender should thus be fundamentally changed, since it does not correspond to the self-understanding of transgender people," the Polish bishops' president told the pope.

"This is all in the name of so-called latest achievements in social sciences," he said.

However, Banka said the Vatican had shown "great critical reserve" about current German demands, adding that the new transgender ruling reflected the impact of "many public voices."

"The Vatican is seeking cautiously to maintain the basic anthropological view of the human person long articulated by the church, while recognizing the present situation requires a deeper, sensitive understanding," the Polish delegate told OSV News.

"While maintaining its unity of doctrine, it's trying to answer pastoral needs by moving towards these people. It's clearly necessary to speak about this, whatever postulates have emerged in Germany."