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Image displays the logo in German of the Synodal Path, which the German bishops' conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics launched in 2019. However, the Vatican has repeatedly cautioned against it adopting structures and positions in contrast to the faith of the universal church, particularly regarding sexuality and women's ordination. (CNS/synodalerweg.de)

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Vatican City — November 21, 2023

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Pope Francis expressed his concern about concrete initiatives individual dioceses and the Catholic Church in Germany as a whole are taking, including the establishment of a synodal council, which, he said, threaten to steer it away from the universal church.

"Instead of looking for 'salvation' in always-new committees and always discussing the same issues with a certain self-referentiality," Catholics need to turn to prayer, penance and adoration as well as reach out to the marginalized and abandoned, the pope wrote in a recent letter.

"I am convinced (it is) there the Lord will show us the way," he wrote in the letter dated Nov. 10. Typewritten in German and signed by the pope, it was published in full by the German newspaper Die Welt Nov. 21.

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The letter was a response to four German laywomen who had written the pope Nov. 6 expressing their "doubts and fears" about the outcomes of the Synodal Path, which began in December 2019 and concluded in March 2023.

The women — moral theologian Katharina Westerhorstmann, theologian Marianne Schlosser, philosopher Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz and journalist Dorothea Schmidt — had been prominent participants in the Synodal Path but withdrew their support in February.

They had said the Synodal Path was "casting doubt" on essential Catholic doctrines and teachings, and organizers were ignoring the Vatican's many warnings, according to a joint statement published by "Die Welt" after their departure.

In his Nov. 10 letter, the pope thanked the women for their "kind letter" in which they expressed their concerns about current developments in the church in Germany.

"I, too, share this concern about the numerous concrete steps that are now being taken by large parts of this local church that threaten to move further and further away from the common path of the universal church," he wrote.

Without a doubt, he wrote, this included the recent formation of a synodal committee. This committee of 74 laypeople and bishops was set up in March and is to spend the next three years working on the establishment of a permanent German synodal council. The synodal council aims to be a national "advisory and decision-making body," made up of bishops and laypeople, that will make key decisions on pastoral, long-term planning and financial matters not decided at diocesan level.

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In a letter approved by Pope Francis, top Vatican officials already had warned organizers in January they had no authority to set up such a body.

Writing to the four women, the pope referred to the admonition against forming the council and said a body like that described by the Synodal Path's resolution "cannot be reconciled with the sacramental structure of the Catholic Church."

The pope thanked the women for their contributions to theology and philosophy and "for your witness to the faith." He asked them to continue praying for him and for "our common concern for unity."

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 8-21, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope sees threat of church in Germany moving away from Rome.