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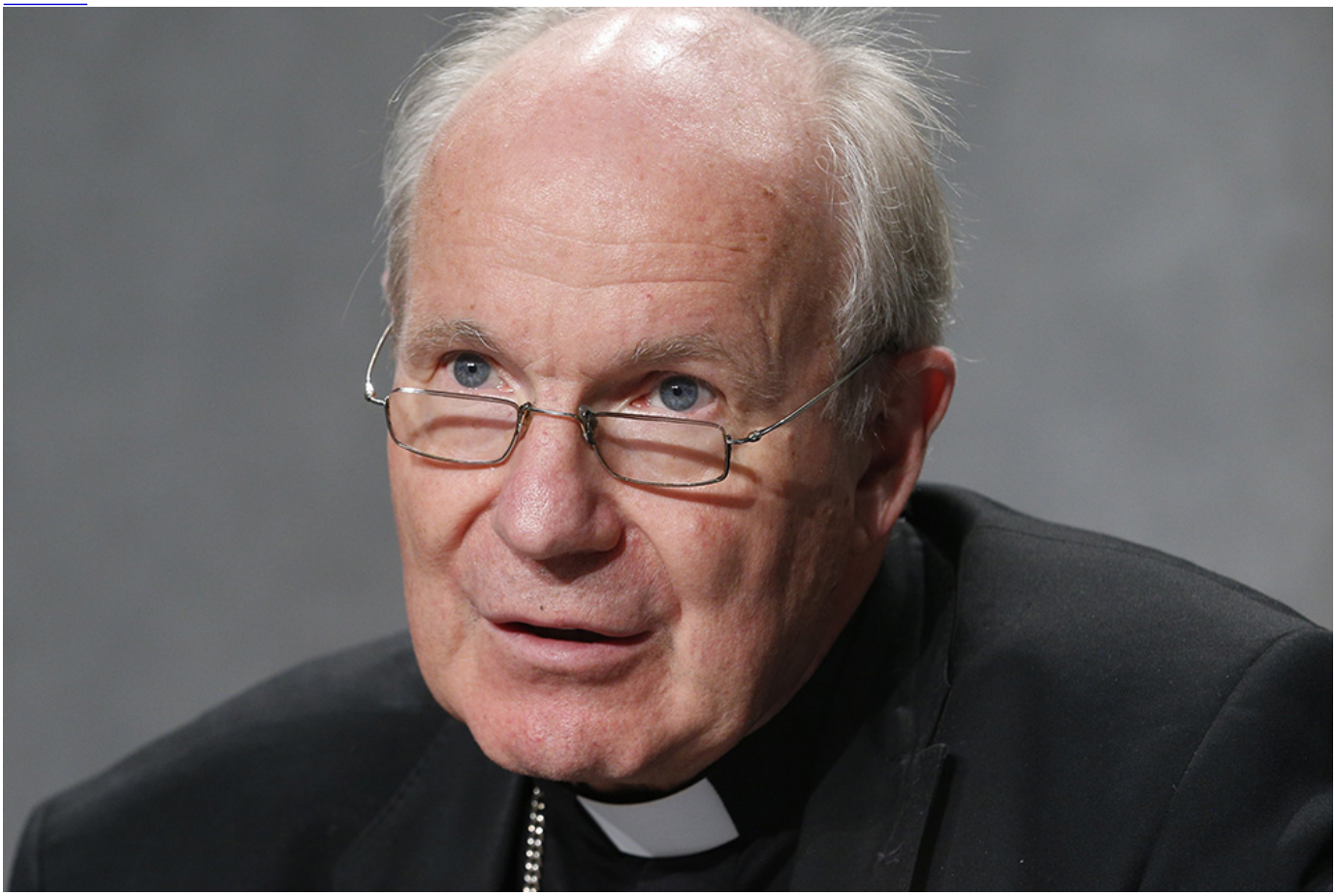

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna speaks at a news conference following a session of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican in this Oct. 21, 2019, file photo. In an interview Feb. 19, 2024, Schönborn warned of schism as German bishops planned to keep their reform course despite a letter from the Vatican halting their vote on statutes of a Synodal Committee. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Augsburg, Germany — February 21, 2024
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Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna warned of schism as German bishops want to keep to their reform course despite the latest letter from Rome, which halted the vote on the statutes of a Synodal Committee.

The move has proceed "in dialogue with Rome," the president of the German bishops' conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg, said in Augsburg Feb. 19. He called the coordination of fundamental church reforms with the Vatican "a matter of course."

That is why, he said, "out of respect for those responsible in Rome," he had removed the controversial voting from the agenda of the bishops' meeting in Augsburg, at which the establishment of a Synodal Committee for Germany was to be decided. "We do not want to and cannot ignore the Roman objection. Now we have to talk," said Bätzing.

The German bishops were "eagerly" awaiting concrete talks with Vatican officials, he said. Three further meetings have currently been "announced" although the bishop stressed it may take up to six months for the Vatican to set the concrete date.

Bätzing emphasized that, in his view, the Synodal Path in Germany and the worldwide Synod on Synodality were heading in the same direction.

In the letter from the Vatican that surfaced over the weekend, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Robert Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, called on the German bishops to suspend a planned vote on the creation of a mixed decision-making body for the Catholic Church in Germany because it would violate canon law. The cardinals said that their letter was "brought to the attention of Pope Francis and approved by him."

Bätzing emphasized that he was willing and able to refute the Vatican's concerns expressed in the letter, and said that a joint body of bishops and laity would not

weaken the authority of the bishops, but rather strengthen it.

Lay German Catholics involved in the Synodal Path called on the bishops to defy Rome and stick to the reform course.

The planned Synodal Committee, whose statutes were to be voted on, was to prepare a Synodal Council in which bishops and laity would not only consult together, but also make decisions.

The Central Committee of German Catholics, the highest representative body of the laity, which had participated in the Synodal Path at the request of the bishops, along with its president Irme Stetter-Karp, called on the bishops to continue the reform project despite the signals from Rome to halt it: "The Catholic Church in Germany will not have a second chance if it stops the Synodal Path now."

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The lay committee’s deputy president, Thomas Söding, called it a contradiction when Rome promotes synodal processes at the Synod on Synodality but then "puts a stop sign on the German reform path."

In an interview with KNA, he added that the letter from Rome was "not a ban, but a step on the brakes." At the same time, he warned against playing for time, because "frustration will grow if the reforms are put on the back burner again."

The "We are Church" initiative also called on the bishops "not to be fooled" by "misleading messages" from Rome. The bishops, the initiative said, should also insist that lay people should also be involved in the further talks in Rome.

Söding told the KNA that the bishops "should hold talks with Rome as quickly as possible." He added however that he's "not sure whether Rome has the courage to open up."

Schönborn has however made an unusually clear statement on the debate about the church's path to reform in Germany. He called on the German bishops not to let the dialogue with Rome break off.

In an interview with the theological website Communio Feb. 19, he agreed with the Roman criticism of the planned progress of the German reform process. The

envisioned involvement of laypeople in fundamental decisions contradicts the constitution of the church, the Austrian cardinal said.

In Schönborn's view, the German bishops should not make any decisions that could lead to a schism. They should "seriously ask themselves whether they really want to leave the communion with and under the pope or rather accept it loyally. Refusing to give in would be ‘obstinatio’ (obstinacy) — a clear sign of a schism that nobody can want." In his view, ignoring the warnings from Rome would be negligent.

Schönborn recalled that the Vatican had already stated several times that the church in Germany was not authorized to establish a joint governing body of lay and clerical people.

"I am impressed by the patience with which the pope and the Roman dicasteries are trying to remain in dialogue with the German bishops and maintain unity and communion," the cardinal emphasized.

The current conflict between the German bishops and Rome is not about "questions of power" or disciplinary issues, Schönborn added. "Rather, Pope Francis is fulfilling his core task of maintaining unity in the faith" because it is about the "basic understanding of the church."

A bishop cannot delegate personal responsibility for important decisions and the transmission of faith to committees, the cardinal said. "Therefore, the idea of bishops voluntarily binding themselves to the decisions of synodal councils is not compatible with the core of the episcopal mission."

The Feb. 19-22 meeting of German bishops in Augsburg is nevertheless expected to be dominated, at least in the talks behind the scenes, with the topic of the Synodal Committee and Synodal Council.