News

A priest blesses a gay couple.

Fr. Christian Olding blesses a gay couple during a service called "Love Wins" in the Church of St. Martin in Geldern, Germany May 6, 2021. (OSV News/Rudolf Wichert, KNA)



by Jonathan Luxmoore

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October 27, 2025

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When Germany's bishops were rebuked by a top Vatican official over a handbook for blessing same-sex couples, the public spat was followed with interest by German-speaking Catholics.

"Whereas the Vatican has authorized spontaneous pastoral blessings, some German bishops wish to go further and offer a ritual form complete with prayers and Gospel readings," explained Fr. Paul Zulehner, a veteran theologian and religious sociologist.

"It isn't clear, however, what a spontaneous pastoral blessing is — while any blessing by a priest already constitutes a ritual," Zulehner said. "In this sense, the difference may not be as deep as the Vatican fears. The Germans are simply taking a step forward, towards something more structured and complete."

The priest spoke amid the ongoing debate between Bishop Georg Batzing, chairman of the German bishops' conference, and Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, Argentinian prefect of the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith. In December 2023, the dicastery's *Fiducia Supplicans* ("Supplicating Trust") allowed Catholic priests to bless same-sex couples informally for the first time.

On April 23, between the death of Pope Francis and the election of Leo XIV, the German "Handbook for Pastors," drafted by a Gemeinsame Konferenz, or joint assembly, of bishops and lay members of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), was released

"Better organized blessings, acculturated in a ceremony, will help priests and those seeking blessings to know in advance what will happen, rather than leaving it to chance," Zulehner said.

"This seems to be the bishops' main goal — to give pastoral recognition, respect and support to loving couples who belong to the church and believe in God."

Pope Francis greets Bishop Georg Batzing.

Pope Francis greets Bishop Georg Batzing, president of the German bishops' conference, during an audience at the Vatican June 24, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Fiducia Supplicans said Catholic clergy could bless couples living in "irregular situations" without requiring a prior "exhaustive moral analysis," provided the act took place "outside of a liturgical framework" and did not imply "something that is not marriage is being recognized as marriage."

The document said requests for same-sex blessings should be considered, case by case, with "practical discernment."

Although many Catholics welcomed the 2023 declaration, it drew criticism from others and was rejected by numerous dioceses and bishops' conferences, especially in the Global South.

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While there should be "no confusion with the liturgical celebration of the marriage sacrament," the handbook says, spontaneous same-sex blessings could include "music and song" as well as scriptural and biblical readings.

"Couples not married in church, divorced and remarried, of all sexual orientations and gender identities are a natural part of our society — quite a few want a blessing for their relationship," the handbook notes.

It says: "The Church wishes to proclaim the God-given dignity of every person in word and deed … She therefore recognizes and offers support to couples united in love, who treat each other with full respect and dignity, and are willing to live out their sexuality in care for themselves and each other with long-term social responsibility."

In its April 23 press release, the bishops' conference said the handbook followed the "pastoral approach" of Francis and reflected concluding resolutions adopted in March 2023 by the German Church's "Synodaler Weg," or Synodal Path reform process, which urged same-sex blessings, as well as greater gender diversity and a re-examination of priestly celibacy.

However, a summer survey by Germany's Katholisch.de online news agency suggested the six-page handbook had been "received very differently" across the German church, with fewer than half the country's 27 Catholic dioceses approving it.

Some dioceses were taking steps to implement it, the agency reported, including Rottenburg-Stuttgart, which published a 15-page brochure in August with prayers for "couples of all sexual orientations and gender identities" who seek blessings "regardless of lifestyle or marital status."

Oher dioceses rejected it and several had not yet reached a final position.

A rainbow flag is seen on the wall of a Catholic church in Cologne, Germany.

A rainbow flag is seen on the wall of a Catholic church in Cologne, Germany, May 10, 2021, as the building is open for same-sex couples to receive a blessing. (OSV News/Reuters/Thilo Schmuelgen)

In a July 22 statement, the Cologne Archdiocese said the new handbook infringed Vatican instructions that blessings should be without "liturgical form," while the Augsburg Diocese said it failed to "guard against a parallel with marriage services."

In an interview for his biography, Leo said he, too, was concerned that "rituals of blessing" were being published which went "specifically against" *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Catholic bishops were required to "come together" and "make common policies or take common approaches," the pope added. Some were "very upset" that "bishops in northern Europe could make a decision changing the doctrine of the church on divorce and remarriage, or on homosexual relationships."

"I do understand that this is a very hot-button topic and that some people will make demands to say, 'we want recognition of gay marriage,' " Leo said.

"Any priest who has ever heard confessions will have heard from all kinds of people with all kinds of issues, all kinds of states of life and choices that are made. I think that the church's teaching will continue as it is."

Batzing in late September dismissed claims of top-level insubordination as "simply absurd," insisting the April handbook had provided "guidance for pastoral practice," rather than "liturgical forms for formal blessing rituals."

"I utterly reject the insinuation that we in Germany are practising episcopal disobedience or are embarking on a confrontational course with Rome," the bishops' conference chairman said after the bishops' fall plenary session.

He described the handbook as a "pastoral clarification of *Fiducia Supplicans*" formed in consultation with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and with a view to the situation in Germany.

But in an interview, Fernández said that his dicastery had not approved the German guidelines.

Participants are pictured in front of the Synodal Path logo.

Participants are pictured in front of the Synodal Path logo during the fourth synodal assembly in Frankfurt, Germany, Sept. 8, 2022. (CNS/Julia Steinbrecht, KNA)

Zulehner told NCR he believed Fernández had felt compelled to "ensure greater clarity" as he approached the end of his term in office.

However, he added that the German bishops could claim to be acting in line with the October 2024 final document of the Vatican synod on synodality, which recommended a "sound decentralization" of authority to bishops' conferences

"The pope could have accepted that the German bishops are merely demonstrating what is possible. Instead, he seems to have denied them this right on the grounds that such steps aren't yet officially authorized," Zulehner said.

Catholics make up about 26% of Germany's 84.5 million inhabitants, although church participation has dropped sharply since 2019, with only 6.6% of Catholics currently attending Mass.

Besides strong support during the reformist Synodal Path, same-sex blessings have been backed by the lay-led ZdK. The German church was also listed among Europe's 10 most LGBTQ-friendly in a recent "Rainbow Index" survey.

In an Oct. 19 commentary, however, the Catholic KNA agency said the handbook, with its call for "interaction with the presider through acclamation, prayer and song," clearly "went beyond" what was permitted in *Fiducia Supplicans*, adding that its official publication by several German dioceses, including Batzing's Limburg see, underscored "a brewing potential for conflict."

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Asked whether the German church was acting against Vatican authority, the German bishops' press office declined to comment. The lay-led ZdK's press officer, Britta Baas, said same-sex blessings would not be discussed further until the German Synodal Way had "evaluated its own resolutions."

The spokesman for the Berlin Diocese, Stefan Foerner, told NCR the issue of blessings had been "long debated" by local Catholics, adding that an August 2023 pastoral directive from Archbishop Heiner Koch remained in force, allowing clergy to bless couples "who cannot or do not want to marry sacramentally" without incurring sanctions.

Zulehner predicted many parish priests would continue "doing what they want" without episcopal intervention, adding that papal and canonical permission for same-sex blessing ceremonies, in line with decentralizing reforms, was "just a matter of time."

"Church teaching has always stipulated that we bless the person, not the sin – otherwise, no one could be blessed, since everyone is a sinner," he said.

"Despite his expressions of anxiety, I think Pope Leo wishes to be a bridge-builder, and to allow parishes and dioceses to decide certain matters for themselves — once the principles of sound decentralization are legally worked out."