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144 theologians confront hierarchy

by Paul Hockenos



Members of the grass-roots Catholic group *Wir sind Kirche* protest Jan. 24 in front of a retreat house in the Würzburg diocese, where the German bishops' conference was meeting. The sign in the foreground reads, "Bishops, speak with us instead of to us." (Dapd/Daniel Peter)

BERLIN -- "In our roles as theology professors we can no longer remain silent," began 144 leading Catholic theologians from Germany, Switzerland and Austria in a bluntly frank open letter to the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

The letter was made public Feb. 3 and has since been published on the internet and quoted in major media.

Update: PrayTellBlog.com is reporting Feb. 15 that more theologians have signed the letter. The total now is 227 theologians from the three German speaking countries, and 249 including theologians from other countries. This link also has an English translation of the letter.

Among other demands, the statement calls for ending celibacy requirements for priests, opening the priesthood to women, and in general introducing significantly more democracy into the church's

structures in the German-speaking world and beyond. "We feel that we have the responsibility to contribute to an authentic new beginning," the theologians continue, referring to the "unparalleled crisis year of 2010."

Last year, the scandal of the physical and sexual abuse of minors by clergy rocked the German church and caused Catholics to exit it in unprecedented numbers. "There can be no calm after the storm," the letter states.

"2011 must be a year of renewal," says the letter, released months before Pope Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit his homeland.

The letter's authors include prominent Catholic religious scholars such as Peter Hünemann and Dietmar Mieth, both of the Catholic Theological Faculty of Tübingen University, Germany, and younger scholars such as Judith Könemann from the Rhineland university city of Münster. Könemann, one of the letter's eight authors, told the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that they had originally expected only 50 or so signatures. "But it obviously hit a nerve," she said. The signatories account for more than a third of the Catholic theology professors in Germany.

The letter calls on Catholic bishops to engage in a meaningful dialogue on reform, saying that the Catholic church can only proclaim the "peaceful and loving God Jesus Christ" when the church itself is credible. In recent years, the letter says, the church has lost this credibility. Moreover, the church has to show more respect for individual Catholics -- for their freedom, dignity and intellect, the letter says.

The religious scholars list a number of specific demands: more synodal structures at all levels of the church; the participation of laypeople in the choosing of priests and bishops; the inclusion of married males and females in the priesthood; the protection of individual rights and nurturing of a culture of rights within the church; and tolerance toward single, divorced, unmarried and gay people.

A general call for more democracy in the church permeates the message: "Those things that affect everyone should be decided by everyone. Those things that can be decided locally should be decided there." The letter takes the church to task for "self-righteous moralizing" that is simply out of place in a body that has itself been guilty of violence and abuse against its own believers.

The letter claims that reforms are necessary in light of the scandals as well as the shrinking number of priests. Only about 100 priests were ordained last year in Germany, and 99 and 92 in 2009 and 2008 respectively. In the early 1960s there were more than 500 in West Germany alone.

The demand for ending the celibacy requirement has recently gained popular support, for example, from leading Catholic politicians in the conservative Christian Democratic Union, the party of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Catholic politicians also wrote to the German bishops last month, criticizing the church's rigidity and inability to constructively field criticism.

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The German bishops welcome the contribution of the theologians to dialogue about the future of the church, said a Feb. 4 statement released by Jesuit Fr. Hans Langendörfer, secretary of the German bishops' conference.

"The church in Germany has to examine with new intensity where its path leads," Langendörfer said.

?The church should recognize and discuss the mistakes and failures of the past, as well as current deficits and calls for reform.?

He noted that several issues raised in the letter are in ?tension? with core church theology and teaching and these will ?require urgent further clarification.?

Langendörfer said the bishops will discuss the issues addressed in the theologians? letter at their plenary meeting in March.

But Auxiliary Bishop Hans-Jochen Jaschke of Hamburg, Germany, spoke out sharply against any attempt to apply pressure on the Catholic church from outside of its structures. Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg, Germany, argued for maintaining the celibacy requirement as it uniquely binds priests to Christ.

The Central Committee of German Catholics, an umbrella organization for lay representatives of various Catholic organizations in Germany, struck a middle position, arguing for relaxing the celibacy requirement when and where there was an acute shortage of priests.

Grass-roots Catholic organizations like Wir sind Kirche (?We Are Church?) have translated the letter and are organizing a worldwide petition to support it. ?It?s not just in Germany where the church has these problems,? says Christian Weisner of Wir sind Kirche. ?The abuse scandals of the past few years have revealed the larger crisis of the Catholic church.?

The church, Weisner said, remains an olds boys? club that thinks it can cover up its misdeeds with impunity. ?The church promised to look into the sources of the scandals but nothing has happened. The bishops promised us a dialogue but they haven?t delivered,? he said. ?It?s very disappointing.?

The last time the Catholic church experienced such an internal uprising was 22 years ago. At the time, 220 Catholic scholars in the Cologne Declaration criticized Pope John Paul II?s authoritarian leadership style. The pope had pushed through a conservative candidate of his own choosing to lead the Cologne archdiocese despite fierce opposition in Germany.

[Paul Hockenos is a Berlin-based American author and political analyst who has written about Germany and southeastern Europe since 1989.]

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