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German bishops eye guidelines for divorced Catholics to take Communion

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

Warsaw, Poland — Church officials in Germany defended plans by the country's bishops' conference to allow some divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion, insisting they have the pope's endorsement.

"We already have our own guidelines, and the pope has now clearly signaled that certain things can be decided locally," said Robert Eberle, spokesman for the archdiocese of Freiburg.

"We're not the only archdiocese seeking helpful solutions to this problem, and we've had positive reactions from other dioceses in Germany and abroad, assuring us they already practice what's written in our guidelines," he said.

Eberle's comments followed the disclosure by Bishop Gebhard Furst of Rottenburg-Stuttgart Nov. 23 that the bishops' would adopt proposals on reinstating divorced and remarried parishioners as full members of the church during their March plenary.

In an interview Wednesday with Catholic News Service, Eberle said "many points" in the pope's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, ("The Joy of the Gospel") suggested the German church was "moving in the right way" in its attitude toward remarried Catholics.

Uwe Renz, spokesman in the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, also defended the bishops' stance. He said he believed the bishops were acting "in the spirit of the pope's teaching."

"Our own dialogue process has shown this is a major issue for both lay Catholics and priests," Renz said.

"Pope Francis has called on bishops to exercise a wise and realistic pastoral discernment on such problems, and our bishops want divorced and remarried Catholics to be a full part of the church community, with full rights," he said.

Archbishop Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirmed in October church teaching that prohibits divorced and remarried Catholics from the sacraments without an annulment. His announcement came after the Freiburg archdiocese issued guidelines making holy Communion available to divorced and remarried parishioners.

In a 4,600-word article in the Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano* Oct. 22, Müller said the "entire sacramental economy" could not be swept aside by an "appeal to mercy," adding that if remarried divorcees were "convinced in their conscience a previous marriage was invalid," this should be "proved objectively" by a church tribunal as required by canon law.

In an Oct. 8 letter to Zollitsch, president of the German bishops' conference, the prefect said the archdiocese's guidelines contained "unclear terminology" and violated church teaching by suggesting remarried Catholics could take a "responsible decision in conscience" to receive sacraments after consulting their priest.

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However, Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising, one of eight members of the international Council of Cardinals advising the pope on reform of the Roman Curia, criticized the stance. He said Müller could not "end the discussion."

Meanwhile, Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier told the *Trierischen Volksfreund* daily Nov. 21 the sacraments offered a "chance for reconciliation and a new beginning." He said the church needed a "more intense and honest account of the concrete reality facing many couples and families."

Several German church leaders earlier welcomed the Freiburg guidelines, including Cardinal Rainer Woelki of Berlin. He told KNA, the German Catholic news agency, Oct. 9 that divorced and remarried Catholics were "welcome in our parishes" and "belong to us."

In a Nov. 23 speech to the lay Central Committee of German Catholics, Furst said a commission of six bishops had been drafting guidelines since 2010 for faithful couples to "gain readmission to the sacraments in justified individual cases," and would present them for approval at the bishops' March meeting.

He explained that the commission had drawn on the Freiburg archdiocese's document as well as a 1993 pastoral letter on the subject by three other bishops.

The bishop told the central committee to applause that he would "make arrangements" in his own diocese if the bishops' plenary failed to "agree a common line."

Speculation about a change in church practice has grown since Pope Francis told reporters in his plane back from World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in July that a Synod of Bishops in October 2014 would explore a "deeper pastoral care of marriage," including the eligibility of Catholic divorcees to receive Communion.

In his apostolic exhortation released Tuesday, the pope said the magisterium should not be expected "to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the church and the world" and cautioned against "a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance."

He added that the "doors of the sacraments" should be not "closed for simply any reason," and said the Eucharist was "not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."

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