

Vatican official downplays bishops' conferences

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 30, 2013 NCR Today

The Vatican's highest doctrinal official has publicly argued against decentralization of the Catholic church's governance structures, seemingly in contrast to Pope Francis' repeated statements in favor of handing over formal authority for some matters from the Vatican to national bishops' conferences.

Archbishop Gerhard Müller, the head of the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reportedly told the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera* that while there must be a "practical balance" of authority between the Vatican and bishops around the world the Catholic church cannot be considered as a confederation of national churches.

"The Catholic Church is made up of local churches, but it is one," Müller told the Italian daily, according to a report by the [German-language news service KathWeb](#) [1]. "There are no 'national' churches."

Likewise, Müller reportedly said that the heads of the world's individual bishops' conferences are "coordinators, not vice-popes." While the pope and individual bishops have been instituted as part of "divine law," bishops' conferences are human institutions.

Catholic bishops in many countries throughout the world have organized national conferences as institutions which allow them to tackle pastoral issues collectively, or maintain a coordinated presence in their respective nations.

The U.S. bishops' conference, first loosely organized during World War I, maintains its office in Washington. It has a number of secretariats, including those focused on pro-life advocacy, Catholic doctrine, and social justice concerns.

The authority of such conferences has been a point of some dispute. While Pope John Paul II's 1998 document *Apostolos Suos* claimed that such conferences do not have doctrinal authority unless they achieve a two-thirds majority of their members on a given issue and receive approval from the Vatican, Pope Francis has said their role has not been "sufficiently elaborated."

Quoting in his November [apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium"](#) [2] from the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium*, Francis said national conferences "contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit" of the church.

"Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated," Francis wrote. "Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach."

Müller's statement regarding bishops' conferences is the last of several he has made in recent months tackling subjects Francis is known to be considering.

In October, the archbishop penned [a 4,600 word article](#) [3] for the Vatican's semi-official newspaper reaffirming church teaching barring divorced and remarried Catholics from receiving communion after the pope mentioned he wanted to explore the issue.

That article seemed to take a different tack than the pope, who told reporters accompanying him on his plane back from Rio de Janeiro in July that church law governing marriage annulments also "has to be reviewed, because ecclesiastical tribunals are not sufficient for this."

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