

Germany's bishops over Church reform

They want Catholic leaders to open their eyes to the precariousness of the present situation and have a serious debate on hot-button issues

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, Vienna

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Theologians in Germany were recently invited to speak to the nation's Catholic hierarchy about the clergy abuse crisis and they used the rare opportunity to chastise the more than 60 bishops for being too slow in pushing for major Church reforms.



The theologians were given an entire "study day" to address the German Bishops' Conference during its March 11-14 spring assembly in the northern Diocese of Osnabrück.

They did not mince their words, openly directing the bishops to the Church's "systemic defects."

Revise the teaching on human sexuality

Professor Eberhard Schockenhoff told the bishops it was imperative for the Church to adopt a positive attitude to human sexuality and drop St. Augustine's "poisoned view" that erotic sexual pleasure was a consequence of original sin.

However, the 66-year-old moral theology professor from Freiburg University, said the abuse crisis was not the reason why the Church's view of sexual morality was no longer credible.

Rather, he blamed it on the fact that the Church had failed to integrate contemporary scientific insights into its teaching on sexual ethics.

Schockenhoff said the Church should no longer condemn the use of artificial contraception by married couples as an act hostile to life.

Instead, he said the use of contraceptives must be recognized as a decision of conscience based on the mutual respect of the spouses in the interest of their children's wellbeing.

The moral theologian said the Church must also recognize that there are other legitimate sexual relationships besides heterosexual marriage.

While lifelong marriage may be the best framework for living out one's sexuality, he said it is not the only one.

The Church must unconditionally recognize same-sex partnerships and stop "disqualifying their sexual practices as immoral," Schockenhof said.

He admitted, however, that promiscuity and having several relationships raise serious moral questions.

Schockenhoff called the positive view of sexuality and the erotic dimension of love that Pope Francis puts forth in his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, "a true ray of hope."

Checks needed on clerical power

Gregor Maria Hoff, who teaches fundamental and ecumenical theology at the University of Salzburg, said the abuse crisis had precipitated the Church into a "sacralization trap," which could only be solved by introducing a system of checks and balances.

The 55-year-old theologian said that, as a religious institution with priests who are seen as representatives of Jesus Christ, the Church possesses a sacred power based on trust.

He said it is thus "fatal" and "disastrous" when such trust, and the power linked to it, are shattered as happens when priests sexually abuse others.

He said the only solution is for the Church to introduce a system of checks and balances so that power is controlled both from within and from outside the Church.

"This is the only way of preventing an unholy power, which still believes in its holiness even when it abuses it, from gaining independence," Hoff emphasized.

"Otherwise, why have some of the Church's highest representatives – of all people – refused to admit their guilt as, for example, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer (Archbishop of Vienna from 1986-1995), who flatly refused to admit his guilt either publicly or to victims to the very end until he died (in 2003)?" the theologian said.

Hoff argued that power would be divided and "sacralised power would dissolve" if the Church were to introduce a system of checks and balances.

The place of women in the Church

"The question for the German bishops' conference is whether it merely wants to delegate power or whether it wants the People of God to participate independently in Church power and is prepared to make this possible," he said.

Later, in a March 15 interview with Kathpress, Professor Hoff said the Church's decision-making processes must be more transparent, stating this is the only way to come to grips with the so-called "hot-button" issues.

These include dealing with power, the Church's teaching on sexual morality, the question of priestly celibacy and "last, but not least, women's place in a clerical Church." He said this final issue should be "the order of the day."

Hoff noted that Pope Francis is continually urging the Church to go to the peripheries, saying this has opened the way for experiments in local Churches. He said introducing participative power would be such an experiment.

Julia Knop, a professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Erfurt, was the most critical of the theologians who addressed the bishops.

She accused them of having opposed, for far too long, any discussion on power in the Church, compulsory priestly celibacy and the teachings on sexual morality.

The 42-year-old Knop said the bishops had, for years, turned these into taboo subjects.

"And I assume that some of you would like to continue this tradition," she told the stunned bishops.

Professor Knop said she hoped the March 13 study day with the episcopal conference would, at last, get the bishops to join in the ongoing discussions.

"You are in leading positions in the Church and you represent a Church whose systemic defects have become obvious," she warned.

Open your eyes to reality

The female theologian admitted that issues of power, celibacy and sexual morality are by no means new to the Church.

"But what is new is that their destructive connection can no longer be denied," she warned.

"They can no longer be brushed aside as the favorite issues of left-wing Catholicism. They simply cannot be made taboos any longer. What is new is the insight that serious Church self-correction is now imperative," she said

In an interview a couple of days later with katholisch.de, the official website of the German Catholic Church, Knop explained that she had not wanted to give the bishops a telling-off.

Rather, she wanted to open their eyes to the precariousness of the present situation and trigger a serious debate on the hot-button issues.

She also defended her statement that some bishops wanted to continue to cut off discussion on controversial inner-Church questions and keep them as taboos.

"In recent months, some bishops have repeatedly warned that one should not speak of typically Catholic systemic dangers, but should see clerical abuse as a phenomenon that is to be found in society in general," she said.

"Whoever argues like this maintains taboos in order to prevent Church reform," Knop said.

"I find the present situation in the Church in Germany really dramatic. Many people are saying that the Church is threatened with collapse," she said.

Knop then made this final point: "Not a single bishop got up and left during my address and no bishop has since told me that what I said was wrong."