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German bishops' head defends Communion plan for divorced

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 2, 2014 NCR Today

The leader of the German bishops' conference has defended a plan by the prelates to offer Communion to divorced Catholics, saying he feels "strengthened" by Pope Francis on the matter despite opposition from the Vatican's highest doctrinal official.

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, chairman of the German Episcopal Conference, says that in reflecting on the opposition to the plan from Archbishop Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he remembers that "a prefect is not the pope."

"As President of the Bishops' Conference I have, in recent years, after our spring and autumn meeting, traveled to Rome to explain our position," Zollitsch said in a Dec. 29 interview [1] with the German newspaper *Die Welt* that has been partially translated [2] by Dutch blogger Mark de Vries.

"If a prefect of one the various congregations would then oppose this position, I would think to go slowly," he continued. "A prefect is not the pope. I look for dialogue, and for me that is the way of collegiality and the dialogue in the church."

Zollitsch, who has led the German bishops since 2008, is referring to a plan by the prelates to allow remarried Catholics to make a "responsible decision in conscience" to receive sacraments after consulting their priest.

That plan, first fully disclosed by the Germans in November [3], was rebuked by Müller in October in a 4,600-word article in the Vatican's semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*.

Defending current practice that divorced Catholics must seek an official annulment from the church before remarrying, Müller said the "entire sacramental economy" could not be swept aside by an "appeal to mercy" on the matter.

The doctrinal official's 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."

Speaking to the German newspaper, Zollitsch said Müller could not take re-examining the church's handling of issues of divorce and remarriage "off the table."

"How can this topic be off the table?" Zollitsch, the retired ordinary of the Freiburg im Breisgau asked. "35 to 40 percent of marriages end in divorce these days."

"As Church we ask ourselves: How should we relate to those concerned?" he asked. "This is the question that our pastoral care office's proposal asks."

Mentioning preparations underway for a global meeting of Catholic bishops in October, known as a synod, Zollitsch continued: "I feel much strengthened by Pope Francis, who has called his own Extraordinary Synod on

Marriage and Family for October of 2014. There we want to present what we in Freiburg have drafted."

The synod, to be held Oct. 5-19, is to focus on "Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization."

A questionnaire sent from the Vatican office organizing the event to bishops around the world asks them to consult their faithful [4] on a number of issues, including "What questions ... divorced and remarried people pose to the Church concerning the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation."

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