NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

German theologians critique church teachings, propose new sexual understanding

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 14, 2014 NCR Today

Two groups of noted German theologians have bluntly outlined how church teaching does not align with the concerns or lifestyles of most European Catholics in response to a Vatican questionnaire on Catholics? attitudes on issues like contraception and same-sex marriage.

Church sexual teachings, say the representatives of the Association of German Moral Theologians and the Conference of German-speaking Pastoral Theologians, come from an ?idealized reality? and need a ?fundamental, new evaluation.?

?It becomes painfully obvious that the Christian moral teaching that limits sexuality to the context of marriage cannot look closely enough at the many forms of sexuality outside of marriage,? say the 17 signers of the response, who include some of Germany?s most respected Catholic academics.

The theologians also propose that the church adopt a whole new paradigm for its sexual teachings, based not on moral evaluations of individual sex acts but on the fragility of marriage and the vulnerability people experience in their sexuality.

The theologians are responding to a Vatican request last October that bishops worldwide prepare for a 2014 global meeting of Catholic prelates by distributing a questionnaire [1] on family topics "as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received.?

Pope Francis has called the meeting of bishops, known as a synod, for Oct. 5-19, 2014. The meeting will focus on "Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization."

The questionnaire, sent from the Vatican?s office for the Synod of Bishops, asked the individual bishops' conferences to question their populations on topics that sometimes have sharply divided the church, like the Catholic teaching prohibiting the use of artificial contraception and the possibility of a divorced Catholic to remarry or receive Communion.

The analysis of the questionnaire by the German theologians comes amidst a continuing dispute between the heads of the German bishops? conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, and the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal-designate Gerhard Müller, over how the church should treat divorced Catholics.

Last year, the Germans announced a plan [2] to allow divorced Catholics to make a "responsible decision in conscience" to receive sacraments after consulting their priest. Müller rebuked the plan in October in a 4,600-word article in the Vatican's semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, saying the "entire sacramental economy" could not be swept aside by an "appeal to mercy" on the matter.

The theologians released to *NCR* on Sunday an English language translation of their document, originally published in German at the end of last year.

The theologians begin in their document by responding to nearly every question in the questionnaire, outlining how or why official church teaching is sometimes not followed.

In response to a question regarding the church?s teachings on the value of the family, for example, the theologians respond that the church?s teachings are ?practically not accepted? and ?often lacks in [their] relation to experience.?

Continuing on that subject, the theologians also state that people ?are not satisfied when the Church proposes only celibacy and marriage as legitimate forms of life.?

?In the light of the Gospel, the question should be examined whether other forms of life could be relieved of the verdict of sin,? they state.

In response to questions on whether Catholics who divorce understand the church?s process of granting annulments, the theologians state that for most persons who divorce the process is ?irrelevant.?

?For most persons concerned the declaration of nullity of the marriage is irrelevant because they do not perceive the nullity of their marriage, but rather its failure, and because they hope for a life beyond this failure,? they state.

?Thus the Church?s canonical practice with regard to marriage does not replace their own responses to situations in which, after the failure of a seriously lived marriage, a perspective of hope is opened up in the shape of a new partner.?

Responding to questions on the church?s prohibition of artificial contraception, the theologians state that ?even the most committed Catholics don?t perceive their practice of artificial contraception as a conflict with their involvement in the Church which might lead to changes in their sacramental practice.?

Moving to their proposal for a new paradigm of evaluating sexual acts, the theologians say the church needs to appreciate the nakedness and vulnerability people experience in their sex lives.

They state that such a paradigm would have at least three dimensions:

- A caring dimension to ?protect that which is fragile.? Marriage, the theologians state, ?could then be understood as an institution that protects this fragility, not as an institution of obligation.?

- An emancipatory dimension that ?opens new perspectives when vulnerability has become violation.??

  ?As an emancipatory ethics, Christian sexual ethics has to take the side of those who lose in relationships, the ones who are left and hurt to the core,? they state. ?It rejects all forms of sexual violence.?

- A reflexive dimension that ?accepts vulnerability and counters the banalization and routinization of sexuality.?

  ?As a reflexive ethics of vulnerability, Christian sexual ethics know the ontological value of vulnerability,? they state. ?The joy of intimacy can be experienced only when it is possible to be vulnerable without being violated.?

Among theologians? signing the German statement are Antonio Autiero, an emeritus professor at the University of Munster; Karl-Wilhelm Merks, an emeritus professor at the University of Tilburg; and Eberhard Schockenhoff, a professor at the University of Freiburg.

The document was translated into English on the theologians? behalf by Stephanie Knauss, an associate professor of religious studies at Villanova University in Pennsylvania.

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Following is a copy of the English translation of the Germans' document.

German theologians respond to Vatican's synod questionnaire [5] by joshua_mac8430 [6]

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