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

Synod on family surveys: German, Swiss Catholics reject teachings on marriage, sexuality

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Synod on the Family
Vatican City

Reports from bishops' conferences in Germany and Switzerland show a clear divergence between what the church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what Catholics -- even those active in parish life -- personally believe.

The differences are seen "above all when it comes to pre-marital cohabitation, (the status of the) divorced and remarried, birth control and homosexuality," said the German bishops' report, posted Tuesday on their conference website in German, Italian and English. (Read the German bishops' report here [1].)

The text is a summary of the official responses from all of Germany's 27 dioceses and about 20 German Catholic organizations and institutions to a Vatican questionnaire published in preparation for October's extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family.

The Swiss bishops' conference published an initial report Wednesday based on 25,000 responses, similar in most cases to those received by the German bishops.

"Most of the baptized have an image of the church that, on the one hand, is family friendly in its attitude, whilst at the same time considering her sexual morality to be unrealistic," the German survey found.

Both the German and the Swiss reports said Catholics in their countries accept the church's vision of marriage as a life-long union of a man and a woman open to having children, and hope to realize that vision in their own family.

However, the German dioceses reported that "'pre-marital unions' are not only a relevant pastoral reality, but one which is almost universal," since between 90 percent and 100 percent of couples who seek a Catholic wedding are already living together, despite church teaching that sex outside of marriage is sinful.

"Many, in fact, consider it irresponsible to marry without living together beforehand," the report said.

Much of the German summary was dedicated to questions concerning divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, who the report said account for a significant share of Catholic couples, including those actively involved in parish life and church activities.

The bishops' conference said one-third of all marriages in Germany end in divorce, and while "Catholics' marriages are somewhat more stable than average," the difference is not great.

The summary said many of the respondents supported a 2013 initiative of the archdiocese of Freiburg to encourage divorced and remarried couples to speak to a local priest about their situation, suggesting that their

status could be resolved as a matter of personal conscience.

Cardinal-designate Gerhard Muller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has criticized the initiative and said Catholics "convinced in their conscience that a previous marriage was invalid" must have that belief confirmed by a church tribunal.

But reforming and streamlining the church's annulment process would not make a big difference in Germany, the bishops' report said, because most remarried people do not regard their original unions as "null and void," but rather as having failed. "They therefore frequently consider an annulment procedure" -- which declares that an apparent marriage was null from the start -- "to be dishonest."

According to the church, a person who has not received an annulment is in most cases still bound by his or her original marriage vows and not free to enter into another union. Someone who remarries under such circumstances is therefore excluded from Communion, though not from church life.

Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis and many bishops around the world have considered the status of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics a pressing pastoral problem; it is one of the problems Pope Francis has said is a matter to be considered at the synod.

Both the German bishops' and the Swiss bishops' summaries said Catholics in their countries believe the church is unmerciful to Catholics whose first marriages have failed.

"Divorce and remarrying frequently lead to a process of becoming distant from the church or of widening the existing gap," the German bishops reported. "Many no longer wish to be associated with an institution which they regard as unforgiving."

Both the German and Swiss bishops' surveys found the vast majority of Catholics reject or simply ignore church teaching that every sexual act between a husband and wife should be open to the transmission of life, therefore ruling out the use of artificial contraceptives.

The Swiss bishops said that "approximately 60 percent of participants in the consultation support the recognition of and a church blessing for homosexual couples," though the responses showed "no consensus, but rather a polarization," with strong negative reactions.

While Catholic teaching insists homosexual people should not be discriminated against, it holds that homosexual acts are always immoral and that marriage can only be a union between one man and one woman.

The German bishops said Catholics in their country, which has recognized "civil partnerships" of same-sex couples since 2000, largely "regard the legal recognition of same-sex civil partnerships and their equal treatment vis-a-vis marriage as a commandment of justice."

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