Catholic theologians call for changes after abuse crisis in Germany

OXFORD, England – More than 140 Catholic theologians from universities in Austria, Germany and Switzerland called for the church to take serious steps to address the problems of the priest shortage by allowing married priests and women to have more active roles in church ministry and allowing laypeople to help select bishops and pastors, among other changes.

A spokesman for the German bishops’ conference cautiously welcomed the theologians’ memorandum, saying the professors “are contributing to debate about the future of the church in Germany.”

“The German bishops have invited this debate,” Jesuit Father Hans Langendorfer, secretary of the German bishops’ conference, said Feb. 4 in a statement.

“These topics need urgent further clarification. To meet the difficult challenges facing the church in Germany with action needs an affirmation rather than just responsiveness by the bishops,” Father Langendorfer said.

“Weighty subjects should no longer be avoided,” he said.

The priest’s comments came in response to a 1,360-word memorandum, “The Church in 2011: A Necessary Departure,” signed by 143 theologians from Germany, Austria and Switzerland and published Feb. 4 by Germany’s Suddeutsche Zeitung daily.
The bishops will discuss the theologians’ call during a plenary meeting in March, he said. Pope Benedict XVI will visit his native Germany Sept. 22-25.

The 143 professors said their appeal Feb. 4 was made in response to the clergy sexual abuse scandals that surfaced in Europe in 2010 and the growing numbers of Catholics who have “terminated their legal membership or they have privatized their spiritual life in order to protect it from the institution.”

The group said it no longer could remain silent in the face of what they say is a lingering crisis within the Catholic Church.

“We have the responsibility to contribute to a new start,” the statement said.

“It looks like we struck a nerve,” said Judith Konemann, a professor from Munster and one of the signatories, reported the German daily Suddeutsche Zeitung.

The theologians also said that the church should “trust in people’s ability to make decision and carry responsibility” in their own lives and “must not revert to paternalism.” They praised the church’s esteem for married and unmarried lives, but said this should not exclude same-sex couples and divorced and remarried couples, though the statement stopped short of asking the church to officially sanction same-sex unions.

The church teaches that any sexual activity outside of marriage, understood to be between a woman and a man only, is sinful.

Regarding divorce and remarriage, in the Catholic Church, civil divorce doesn’t exclude one from the sacraments. A person cannot receive the sacraments if he or she remarries outside the church while still bound by a previous marriage.

In their statement, the theologians questioned the wisdom of lately bringing back old
forms of liturgical worship and warned that liturgies were in danger of becoming “frozen in traditionalism.”

“Cultural diversity enriches liturgical life,” they said. “Only when the celebration of faith takes account of concrete life situations will the church’s message reach people.

The theologians warned that community life is eroding and historical identity and social networks have given way under the priest shortage and larger and larger parishes.

“Priests are ‘overheated’ and burnt out. The faithful stay away when they are not trusted to share responsibility and to participate in democratic structures in the leadership of their communities,” they said. “Church offices must serve the life of the communities - not the other way around.”

Enacting the reforms the theologians outlined would attract people back to the church, the statement said.

The memorandum was published two weeks after a call by eight leading Catholic members of Germany’s governing Christian Democratic Union, including Norbert Lammert, president of the Bundestag, the German parliament, to make a “regional exception” by admitting married men to the priesthood.

The German bishops have said two-thirds of all parishes will not have their own priest by 2020 and have embarked on an effort to merge parishes in response.

In a late January statement, the bishops’ conference said the relaxation of celibacy was “not foreseen for discussions” during preparations for the pope’s official September visit to Germany, his third homecoming, and would not be debated by individual church leaders.
The conference added that the issue and would require a “decision binding for the whole church” and an “appropriate preparation of public opinion”, rather than being determined by the German church alone.

In a letter to the politicians, several of whom belong to the church’s Central Committee of German Catholics, Cardinal Walter Brandmuller, retired president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, said the call “personally insults the overwhelming majority of priests who’ve freely chosen, lived and faithfully upheld their celibacy,” and risked leading German Catholics “into schism and creation of a national church.”

However, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, the former German bishops’ conference president, later dismissed Cardinal Brandmuller’s letter as “one-sided,” and said he was wrong to reject the views of eminent lay Catholics.

Nina Schmedding, deputy spokeswoman for the German bishops’ conference, said clerics would not comment further on the memorandum.

“We’ve said we’ll talk about such issues as married priests, but not this year,” Schmedding told Catholic News Service Feb. 7. “Our position will be the same on all such initiatives.”