

# German ‘synodal way’ is rapid response to abuse scandal, conference says

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The bishops of Germany, reacting to an independent study of the extent of clerical sexual abuse in their country and its possible causes, chose to initiate a “synodal” process that was not a synod or a plenary council.

Building on a series of “listening sessions” the bishops held from 2011 to 2015, “we did not choose a synod because it would take too long,” and the sex abuse study called for a rapid response. So “we have chosen something sui generis: the synodal way,” said Matthias Kopp, spokesman for the conference.

The entire bishops’ conference is to discuss the final plans for the process when the bishops meet Sept. 23-26 in Fulda. The proposal of the conference leadership and the leadership of the lay Central Committee of German Catholics is to engage in a two-year process beginning in Advent.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, had written to the president of the German bishops’ conference in early September insisting that the process could not begin without the approval of the pope.

The cardinal also included a critique by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts of a draft of the proposed statutes for the “synodal way.” The pontifical council concluded that while the German bishops were calling their process a “synodal way,” it was, in fact, a plenary council and should follow the procedures for a plenary council outlined in the Code of Canon Law.

On a level of the people involved and the kinds of decisions that can be made, a plenary council, such as the one currently being prepared for the Catholic Church in Australia, is the highest governing assembly the bishops of a nation can convoke.

Vatican approval is necessary to begin the process, and the Vatican also must approve the bishop elected to preside over the assembly. Only bishops have a

“deliberative” vote on decisions made during a plenary council, but a limited number of priests, religious and laypeople can be invited, can speak and have a “consultative vote.”

And the decisions of a plenary council are not to be promulgated until reviewed by the Vatican, according to canon law.

A diocesan or national synod has a more limited scope; participants who are not bishops are there to assist the bishops by offering their opinions, even if those opinions take the form of a vote.

In the wake of the sexual abuse scandal and the independent report on its extent and contributing factors, the German bishops decided they needed to work with lay Catholics on addressing issues raised in four areas: the exercise of power and authority in the church; sexual morality; the priesthood, including the issue of mandatory celibacy; and the role of women in the church, including the possibility of opening more areas of ministry to them.

The Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts insisted that because those topics “touch the entire church,” they cannot be the object of deliberations by the church in one country. The council also objected to how the draft statutes appeared to give an equal vote to bishops and laypeople without distinguishing between a “deliberative” and a “consultative” vote.

In response to the letters from the pope and Cardinal Ouellet, Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising, president of the German bishops’ conference, met with both in Rome in mid-September to discuss plans for the German “synodal way.”

In both meetings, “a constructive dialogue took place, which will be included in the deliberations” of the bishops’ general assembly in Fulda, Cardinal Marx said in a statement released Sept. 20.

Pope Francis’ letter to “the pilgrim people of God in Germany” was published in June; in it, he pledged his “support” and his desire to “be closer to you to walk by your side and encourage the search to respond with parrhesia (boldness) to the present situation.”

At the same time, the pope said taking a synodal path is a process that must be guided by the Holy Spirit with patience and not a “search for immediate results that generate quick and immediate consequences but are ephemeral due to the lack of maturity or because they do not respond to the vocation to which we are called.”

Cardinal Marx repeatedly has been quoted as saying that the deliberations of the “synodal way” would be “binding,” but Kopp told Catholic News Service Sept. 20 that “binding means it is a vote,” not simply a discussion. However, he said, “the decision to implement is always the bishop’s responsibility” and nothing can be imposed on a bishop who does not agree.

Kopp also said that while everyone involved in the “synodal way” deliberation will have a vote, for passage of a proposal “a double majority would be needed: a majority of the members and a two-thirds majority of the bishops.”

When he met Pope Francis privately Sept. 19, Cardinal Marx gave him a letter he and Thomas Sternberg, president of Central Committee of German Catholics, signed after a joint meeting of bishops and committee members.

“We want to set out on a path of conversion and renewal. We want to listen together to God’s word in our time in order to be able to witness it credibly,” they wrote. “We want to fight the causes of the abuse scandal and renew our fellowship as a church.”

Referencing the four specific themes the “synodal way” is being designed to discuss, they said, “we need to study these issues in depth to credibly witness to the Good News in the midst of today’s world. We need the atmosphere of an open, respectful conversation in order to search together for solutions.”

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