



Cardinal Gerhard Müller, shown attending a conference at the Pontifical Angelicum University in Rome on June 13, 2015, spoke recently about the necessity of reiterating Catholic teaching in comments to the Register. (Bohumil Petrik/CNA photo)  
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## Cardinal Gerhard Müller: ‘True Reform of the Church Is About Her Renewal in Christ’

In a wide-ranging interview that discusses the Pan-Amazon synod and the Church in his home country of Germany, the cardinal says Western Christianity

is experiencing a crisis of faith and spiritual leadership.

Edward Pentin

The thinking behind the much-debated working document for the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region is a “projection” of European theological thought not in accord with Catholic theology and needs to be corrected “in a more Catholic way,” Cardinal Gerhard Müller has said.

In comments to the Register to be broadcast on EWTN Poland, the prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also said priestly celibacy cannot be changed (some involved with organizing the synod wish to ordain married men in the Amazon region) “as if it were only an external discipline, as it is deeply connected with the spirituality of the priesthood.”

Furthermore, the German cardinal sees an obvious “connection” between the agenda for the Oct. 6-27 synod and the “synodal path” proposed by some German bishops as a means to modify the Church’s teaching on sexual morality. He also discusses Pope Francis’ recent letter to German bishops, why he wrote his “Manifesto of Faith” in February, and why Pope St. John Paul II’s teachings appear to be given less attention during this pontificate.

*Your Eminence, what are your views on the instrumentum laboris for the Pan-Amazon synod?*

It’s only a working document, it’s not a document of the magisterium of the Church, and everybody is free to give his opinions about the quality of the preparation of this document. I think there isn’t a big theological horizon behind it. It has been written mostly by a group of German descendants and not by people who are living there. It has a very European perspective, and I think it is more of a projection of European theological thinking upon the people of the Amazonian region because we heard all these ideas 30 years ago.

Not all of the ideas accord with basic elements of Catholic theology, especially the conception of religion. We have the conception of a revealed faith, historically realized in the Incarnation of the Word of the Father in Jesus Christ, infused by the Holy Spirit. But the

Catholic Church is not a religion as a natural relation to transcendence. We cannot understand the Catholic Church only within the frame of a concept of religion. Religions are made by man, they are impressions, means, rites of anthropological desires and thinking about the world, but our faith is based on the revelation of God in the Old and New Testament, in Jesus Christ. We, therefore, have to correct this thinking in this document in a more Catholic way.

*Critics have said this document takes its starting point from the trials and sufferings of the people of the Amazon and not Revelation and Christ himself.*

It can start with suffering of the people, but this is not the starting point of the Catholic faith. We begin with baptism, and we confess our faith to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christ himself came into the world, and his cross takes on all the suffering of the world. But it's another thing to begin with people and then to relativize revelation only as an expression of European culture. That is absolutely wrong.

*There is also a focus on theology that some critics believe is basically a "cultural recycling of liberation theology." Do you agree this document possibly represents a push to pass liberation theology through the back door?*

Liberation theology is a wide concept, but **liberty is the basic element of our faith because we are saved, we've been freed by Jesus Christ from sin, liberated from distance from God.** This [liberty] also contains the healing of worldly elements and dimensions, but we cannot convert the approach of Christ and his cross and his taking all the suffering and sins of the world on himself to an immanent approach, as then, in the end, we relativize Revelation as only one expression of the Greek-Roman culture. It's the wrong approach.

Liberation theology is a Catholic theology that begins with Revelation, that begins in Holy Scripture, in the Tradition, the magisterial life of the Church, and we cannot put the stress on a new hermeneutic that is alien to the Catholic faith.

*So you would argue that liberation theology per se is okay, but it can be used in different, unorthodox ways?*

It can be understood as Christians taking over responsibility for society, integral development. We are not only interested in the world, but in the center of Revelation, which is communion with God, beginning in this life, and also the radiance of the good works that God made for us.

But we cannot convert Christianity, the Church, to being an NGO only for a worldly development, so that immanent development is the center of our faith. Our faith is in relation to the Triune and personal God.

*Do you think this document leads to a more immanent perspective (that the divine is manifested in the material world), rather than a Catholic one?*

Yes, this is the danger because behind this document are not great theologians, and there is this more practical, rather ideological approach to the questions.

*The other aspect some are concerned about is priestly celibacy, and that the document raises the possibility of ordaining married men, or mature men with families, to the Catholic priesthood in the Amazon. Are you concerned this could lead to an undermining of clerical celibacy universally, as some critics have said?*

Well, on the one hand, they are pushing for this [an end to mandatory priestly celibacy] and saying it openly, and, on the other hand, saying when asked that they won't undermine priestly celibacy. The discipline is rooted in the spirituality of the priesthood in the Western and Latin Church. We cannot change it as if it were only an external discipline, as it is deeply connected with the spirituality of the priesthood, as the Second Vatican Council said (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16).

We accept married priests in the Eastern Churches where there's this tradition, but the Latin Church will continue with celibacy in the priesthood in this way. I think this isn't the great solution they expect which will resolve all the problems, because the crisis in Christianity in the Western world is nothing to do with the celibacy of the priesthood

and religious vows. It is a crisis of faith and also of the spiritual leadership.

*Many of the people involved in this synod are of a German background. It was said in Vatican II that the Rhine flows into the Tiber. Would you say this is similar, a case of the Rhine flowing into the Amazon?*

We see it's not a good influence because the Catholic Church is going down in Germany. Look at the results. They [German Church leaders] are not aware of the real problems [in the Church today], and they are speaking about sexual morality, celibacy and women priests. But they don't speak about God, Jesus Christ, grace, the sacraments, and faith, hope and love, the theological virtues, and the responsibility Christians and the Church have for the development of the society in which there's a deep legalism and desperation — like the Pope said, of a new Gnosticism and a new Pelagianism.

We are not able to promote the Gospel for people in Germany and other parts of Europe, such as Belgium and the Netherlands. And you see the consequences of this progressive wave.

*Why is there this German influence on this synod — is it because they want to use the meeting to perhaps coincide with this “synodal path” that's being proposed by Cardinal Reinhard Marx? Is there a connection with this?*

There is obviously a connection. They dealt with sexual abuse in absolutely the wrong way. They were not able and could not see the real causes and reasons of this crisis, and they're speaking all the time about other things that have nothing to do with it.

We also don't learn from the decline of Protestantism in Europe. You have all these married pastors, their acceptance of same-sex “marriage,” and they don't have celibacy. But in spite of this, the situation of the Protestant church in Europe is worse than in the Catholic Church. So this cannot be the medicine to overcome the deep crisis, the crisis of faith. It's a misunderstanding of the apostolic mission of bishops, who are not political leaders. In the end, it will be useless.

*What do you think of synodality and this “synodal path” as a means of governing the Church? Do you think there’s a danger, as some believe, that it could bring alien ideas into the Church?*

I think it’s very idealistic. There’s no biblical foundation for it. We speak of collegiality of the bishops, but we now see in the so-called reform of the Curia that the Curia is in danger of turning into any other secular institution. All power is concentrated in the Secretariat of State. They don’t speak about the participation of the Roman Church or the Petrine authority of the Pope. They’re suppressing the word “congregation” [used for Vatican departments with executive authority], which is a translation of *synodus* in Greek.

So, on the one hand, they’re suppressing the synodality of the Holy Roman Church, the College of Cardinals, and, on the other hand, they’re converting the institution of the Curia into simply a bureaucracy, into only functionalism and not an ecclesiastical institute. We have a common responsibility to be involved in the life of the Church, that is true, but we have had this universal participation since the beginning of the Church, for 2,000 years.

We cannot now invent the Church as if the Church is old-fashioned and now to be refashioned according to those calling themselves progressives, who want to build the Church according to their ideas.

*In February you wrote a “Manifesto of Faith.” Why did you write it?*

I was asked by many people to say something because of a certain chaos in the Church and much misunderstanding about the essentials of Christianity: What is matrimony, what is the priesthood, for example? We cannot deny all that is said in the Old and New Testament and in the Tradition of the Church.

We have a deep theology about the seven sacraments, and this cannot be dominated by doubts over these essential elements, which are leading us to eternal life. Therefore, I just underlined the essential points of our Christian faith, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the sacramentality of the Church, the identity of our faith and our life, and our hope for eternal life.

The reaction was not always very intelligent, and I could not understand it; in fact, nobody could understand why pointing out

these basic elements of the faith could be interpreted as a criticism of the Pope, the Successor of St. Peter, as he has the highest responsibility for the expression of our faith. This is given in our Creed — it begins with: ‘I believe in’ God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creation, redemption and the ultimate perfection of sacraments, and hope for eternal life. We are baptized in the name of the Triune God, and we express our belief in the works of creation, redemption and the gift of eternal life.

*Did you support the recent “Declaration of Truths of the Faith” issued by Cardinal Raymond Burke and four bishops? It is all true what they said, no?*

*Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne has thanked Pope Francis for his letter to the German Church for “fearlessly” calling on Catholics in Germany to be a missionary Church in the face of the Church’s decline there. But others have warned that it can be read in different ways and that it speaks of the Church in Germany being “before a fundamental transformation process.” What is your own view of the letter, and how important is it for the German Church?*

In his letter to German Catholics, the Pope has set the standard for Church unity in the truth of Revelation. We believe in the Triune God and his Church as a sacrament of the salvation of the world. Therefore, the process of transforming the Church into a secular organization with spiritual and social services is nothing more than a contradiction of her divine foundation and mission.

The mental abandonment of the whole undertaking is reflected in loss of reality in the analysis of the causes of sexual abuse of young persons. Its causes lie in individual violation of the Lord’s commandments and in the hedonistic atmosphere in the Western world.

The redirection of sexual impulses to adults of both sexes, which is disguised as a reassessment of sexual morals, does not eliminate a contradiction of God’s commandments. The seduction of men and women over the age of 18 is also a mortal sin, “which excludes from the Kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9) and a “dishonoring of one’s own body” through behavior against the nature given by God, male and female (Romans 1:24-27). Sexual relationships have a legitimate,

morally impeccable and graceful place only in the marriage of a man and a woman. I also hope that on the question of connecting the priesthood with celibacy, one does not fall short of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16) and the encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*.

True reform of the Church is about her renewal in Christ and the revival of apostolic zeal for man's eternal salvation. Among the loud and officious protagonists arrogantly calling themselves reformers are a few who shine with the sanctity of life, the readiness for sacrifice and renunciation, and for complete surrender to Christ and the Church, his beloved Bride and our mother in faith. The very terms just mentioned only elicit an ironic smile from them for so much lack of enlightenment and proximity to the modern reality of life.

The great reform movements in Church history have produced saints and have been promoted by scholars in the sacred sciences and by clergy and religious who related themselves to the word of the Lord: "The zeal for your house consumes me" (John 4:17).

*We recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of Pope St. John Paul II's election, but why do you think his teaching is being marginalized during this pontificate and not upheld like it used to be?*

Because in the background there is this strange idea that Vatican II and its reforms were stopped by John Paul II and Benedict and now we must overcome this "block" and begin anew when Vatican II ended. But this is not a valid Catholic idea.

We believe in the continuity of the Church and every pope, council and bishop. Every time period has special importance, as does every pope and bishop within the context they are living — but always in continuity with all the councils and all the popes of the past.

We cannot contradict the councils, saying "I am for the Council of Trent," another saying, "I am for the First Vatican Council," someone else saying, "I am for the Second Vatican Council," and a third wanting a Third Vatican Council. The Councils are not a refoundation of the Church; they have only the authority to express and confess the Catholic faith at that time. Never will we receive a new revelation (II.V, *Dei Verbum*, 10), because "grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

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