

Every Priest Should Be Allowed to Marry

GEORG BÄTZING, the highest ranking bishop in Germany, begs forgiveness for the abuse scandals and supports the idea of female priests as well as the end of priestly celibacy.

He would gladly preach the Good News, however, currently, he is the crisis manager of the great abuse scandal in the Catholic Church: 'Georg Bätzing, 60, is the Bishop of Limburg, Germany and since 2020 chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, which, beginning March 7th, will, once again, be meeting for their plenary assembly. The number of people who have left the Church has, in some places, doubled; the reputation of the Church is at a low point. BUNTE met with Bishop Bätzing in the bishop's house, located on the Limburger Domberg (cathedral hill), for an interview.

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Had you always been certain that you wanted to become a priest?

This was in the air since my youth. I come from a normal Catholic family, if someone was too pious, they were considered suspicious. When I told them that I

wanted to enter seminary, they asked me if I truly wanted to do so: to live without a family. Examine yourself well.

But you were a handsome young man. You didn't have a girlfriend with whom you were in love?

Up until this day I have many girlfriends, but not in the sense that you mean. I never, as they so nicely say, went out with a girl. I felt early on: there exists something holy and it wants to enter my life.

Can one plan on becoming bishop?

The closer one comes to this, the more one says: For Heaven's sake, let this cup pass me by. Pope Francis once said: "We do not want those who want it."

How many nuns look after you?

None. I go to the store on my own. I have a housekeeper who works part time. She cleans and washes. Everything else I do myself. I also love cooking for friends.

Cardinal Marx loves to dance – do you also have a passionate hobby?

At weddings I say to women: we get along very well. If you want things to remain this way, then don't ask me to dance" (*laughs*). I do, however, like to play the organ and the piano. For this my old

Yamaha E-Piano in my apartment suits my needs.

How difficult was it for you, in 2016, to succeed the scandalized bishop, Tebartz van Elst, who built himself a luxury house that, in the end, cost over 30 million euro?

In the beginning I thought it would be overly demanding. How can one make it right, build up trust again? Then I realized: I need only be myself. People want normalcy. I approached everyone with humility.

Did you move into his luxury apartment?

No, that is not my style. We utilize all that publicly for expositions, lectures, and celebrations, and the chapel in order to stream services. Everyone can enter it. Through this it has lost its hint of scandal.

The list of profligacy was long: a bathtub for 15,000 euro, a wire rope hoist for an Advent wreath for 100,000 euro, a table for 25,000 euro.

We are presently sitting at that table. The suspension bracket for the Advent wreath came out of its coil in no time. That doesn't bother me. Sometimes people ring the doorbell and wish to see the bathtub. I then jokingly tell them, I'm sorry, the bathtub is not in the house at the moment, as we are having it regilded.

My compliments. You have a good sense of humor. And what is luxury for you personally?

Going on vacation with friends. A week in Liguria, a week in South Tyrol. Mountains and the ocean. There, I will also walk around in shorts. I simply live. I drive a Peugeot 308, sometimes even right into a speed trap.

Have you sinned yet today?

At every Mass we all say: "in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do", I am no saint.

Your name is George. He is one of the fourteen Catholic Holy Helpers. Do you consider yourself a Hercules of the Church? Or do you see yourself as Sisyphus, who kept rolling a stone up the hill, to no avail?

Georgios in Greek means the earth worker, that is how I see myself.

Georg is often depicted as the dragon slayer. Is your problem that many a dragon, that is many an abuser, has come out of its cave?

Saint George is an archetype: He wanted to protect the innocent and, for this, give his life. In the Church we observe a past in which we did not always protect the innocent and the weak. Reputation was more important to us. It is no good, we must bring light into the darkness. Everything must be placed on the table.

Do you have the most difficult task?

"My church must change, or else it will turn into a sect."

No, the faithful do, the faithful, who every day, must hear, "with all due respect, but why are you still in this club?". They cannot defend themselves. It is for them that I go to the Arena to meet Anne Will (a talk show

host with an emphasis on political matters).

Merely one in eight people trusts the Church. Hardly anyone says anymore: I am proud to be a Catholic.

Exactly. It is disastrous. In theater, the

crisis is, often times, the turning point: it leads to a tragedy. Or to a renewal. I believe that good will prevail. But first I must ask the faithful for forgiveness for all the failures. We must, mercilessly, bring everything to light – every bishop in his diocese. We in Limburg have been doing so since 2020. A reprocessing by independent experts. This is no longer in our hands. This is good. There is no other way.

Have you spoken to any victims?

Yes, I am always prepared to do so. That's a matter for the boss. Every person from my diocese, who wishes to make an appointment with me will get an appointment, this I can guarantee. Some have learned to cope with it, others are never again able to rebound.

Unfortunately, many of those affected are able to speak of the unspeakable only decades later. At that point, the statute of limitations has already passed. According to our guidelines, we, since 2010, and in part prior to this, have continuously passed on all suspected cases to the public prosecutor's office and remove suspected priests from all Church ministry even before an adjudication takes place. In grave cases, the independent commission recommends a compensation of more than 50,000 euro.

The second accusation: You do not keep pace with the times. No one follows your morals, which permit sexual relations only with a marriage.

This is true. And we must, in part, revise this aspect in the Catechism. Sexuality is a gift from God and not a sin.

Is it ok, if men want to love men and women want to love women?

Yes, that is ok if it takes place in the context of trust and responsibility. This does not affect the relationship with God. Jens Spahn (German politician), for example, is a good Catholic. And I can guarantee that no gay man in my diocese will be laid off from any Church ministry because of his sexuality. And no lesbian woman. No one must be afraid any longer, of losing his or her job, if they choose to live out their personal intimacy. That does not concern me.

You are now 60 years old. Do you think you will see priests being able to marry and priestly celibacy come to an end?

I very much hope so. I personally wanted to follow Jesus – who was not married. That is my ideal. But of course I can imagine married priests. It would very much enrich the Church. I personally know married priests from the Eastern Catholic churches, very competent ones. Priests should be allowed to live in a marriage and a family – it is not unchristian. Only unusual.

Your cousin, the former State Minister of Social Affairs, Sabine Bätzing-Lichtenthäler, divorced her husband in 2009 and then remarried – does she live in sin, as the Catholic Church teaches?

I am not under that impression. She has a wonderful new family. There is always a possibility of failure. And then there must be the possibility of a new beginning. We should support people during those times and not, as we have in the past, cause them to have a crisis of conscience. For this I must apologize in the name of

“It is not unchristian for a priest to live in a marriage and a family.”

the Church. I am certain: God does not begrudge anyone a new beginning.

There are hardly any young priests. You have an enormous problem with producing new priests. When will women be permitted to become priests?

I can very well imagine women going into an ordained ministry, female deacons would be a good start. Many have the calling for it within them. The tradition of

a man always standing in the front no longer has the desired effect. I can feel this in our parishes. We need the power of women for this. And we should believe them capable everything.

Is there a woman you particularly admire – aside from the Virgin Mary?

Angela Merkel. She has my utmost respect.