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Bishop Georg Bätzing “I admit, yes, the Pope also disappoints me”

Bishop Georg Bätzing in conversation with journalist Christiane Florin on Deutschlandfunk Radio | May 25th, 2022

Christiane Florin: *Why are you still a member of the Roman Catholic Church?*

Georg Bätzing: It is my home. It is my family. And especially in hard times it is important to stay with it. And my conviction is: Without this church, I would not have faith. And that is the foundation of my life.

Florin: *Then, does this church, this institution, serve what you believe?*

Bätzing: Yes, that's what it serves. When I'm on the road and notice how many people are committed, on the road, investing the best of their lives in what the Church is, in all its areas, whether it's the diaconate, whether it's proclamation, catechesis, education, then that convinces me again and again. Yes, this Church serves that. But your question, of course, goes to the crisis phenomena in a really crisis-ridden time. That has to be said.

Florin: *A few days ago, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Speyer (Andreas Sturm) resigned from the Roman Catholic Church. He has not only resigned from his office, but he has left. And he becomes a priest of the Old Catholic Church. One of his reasons was that he no longer had any hope for reform. Vicar general is a high office. You were also one before you became a bishop. What does this step mean to you?*

Bätzing: Well, that was a big shock, personally for me as well. I know Andreas Sturm well, also from working with him, and I know how powerfully he has worked on changes in the Church. His word carries weight, and when someone in this position and with this power says that I don't believe that things can continue well, it irritates a lot of people. I feel that at the moment. That's an issue everywhere. What does it mean when someone leaves at the top? I am very sorry that it gives exactly the opponents of the changes grist to the mill.

Florin: *In what way?*

Bätzing: I get emails saying, “He did it right. The church is not to be changed. It should not be changed. And please leave, too. Then we will have one less problem, and so will you.” This is bitter for me.

Florin: *Isn't there also a pain threshold for you, a point at which you say: If nothing changes, then I don't want to be bishop of this church anymore?*

Bätzing: Yes, there would be if I had the impression that nothing is changing. But I have the impression that a lot is changing at the moment.

Florin: *What?*

Bätzing: You just mentioned Limburg. The Limburg scandal, a financial and trust scandal, has led to a genuine financial transparency offensive in the Church in this country. Everyone can now know what happens to the money that church-taxpayers give – first example. Second example: In the Diocese of Limburg, we published our documentation of coming to terms with the abuse two years ago, but not just a coming to terms with it, we drew the consequences from it. We almost can't keep up with implementing these changes that we want, 60 in number. And we are in the process – that is my commitment – which I have already given, and I hope that this will also be possible on the Synodal Path, to strengthen synodality so that episcopal power is contained, accountable, limited and controlled.

Florin: *You have now mentioned the Synodal Path. This is a discussion format between bishops and lay people. It's about power, participation, the importance of priests, priesthood, sexual morality, and this "thing with the women," as I call it. No reform of that is likely to happen, after all. Even if you were to pass it with a majority in Germany, what do you think you could get out of it in Rome? You recently spoke out in favor of ending compulsory celibacy. Pope Francis is making no effort to change that.*

Bätzing: Yes, that's the famous expectation management. If you always see only the peaks – so celibacy falls or stays? Will women become priests, or won't they? – then you would write your own disappointment in the book. Because that is clear: That will not come in the next five years. For that it would need councils, so to speak.

Florin: *But is there anything in between?*

Bätzing: Yes, there is quite a lot. It's like the famous iceberg. The mass of the iceberg lies underneath.

Florin: *What is then the mass of the iceberg under the equality of women in all offices?*

Bätzing: That is to create all the opportunities for equality that we can right now. There is a lot of room for improvement. In 2013, the Bishops' Conference established a quorum, so to speak, for leadership positions. We are close to that. But we still have a lot to do. I would like to have women in all leadership positions that they can hold in the church. Knowing that this does not make the question of the sacramental ministry, and whether women become priests, any less difficult, but rather more difficult.

Florin: *And then you go to Rome with it, if that would be decided, and then the Pope will say again and many bishops, too: The women should orientate themselves on the humble Mary. Just as he wrote in the last post-synodal letter.*

Bätzing: Yes, I simply believe in a certain circular culture of discussion, which the Pope also adopts. Yes, the last time it was about the question, when the Amazonian dioceses were together, about the question of celibacy. And there was a majority in favor of making married men priests in this region under certain conditions. The pope did not decide to take that up. But the question is there. The question is not going to decrease just because the pope says so. **Nor will the question of women in the ministry diminish just because the pope takes a different position.** I have been able to speak with the Pope several times and I know that he takes a decidedly different position.

Bätzing: “I admit, yes, the Pope also disappoints me”

Florin: *Are you disappointed by Pope Francis? He started with an original name and does not call himself Benedict XVII, but now he continues with many things.*

Bätzing: I admit, yes, the Pope also disappoints me, but in the sense of deception. The Pope, even in the Catholic Church, even with all the right that would be his, is not the one who could turn the Church from its head to its feet, which is what we want. He does what he can. Namely, he is initiating a process where all these questions are put on the table. For the 2023 World Synod, and for questions like, “Are the groups allowed to be there, are LGBTQ allowed to be there?” he always says: everyone.

Florin: *Are women actually allowed to vote at the World Synod? Do they have the right to vote?*

Bätzing: So far, this is not foreseen. But I was already at a conference of the European Presidents of the Bishops' Conference with Cardinal Grech. And the question came up. And I didn't have to ask it. It will be a question. I don't think we can get around that.

Florin: *But that is already very modest, isn't it? That on the one hand you think you can demand equality with a certain realism and on the other hand women are not even allowed to vote at a world synod?*

Bätzing: That, in fact, is really a difficult situation.

Florin: *You briefly mentioned the topic of queer earlier. Recently, there were again blessing ceremonies for homosexual couples under the slogan “Love wins”. There, too, the Vatican has expressly said no, has forbidden it. And you once said in 2019, “If Bishop Georg says that there are blessing celebrations for homosexuals in Limburg, then tomorrow Bishop Georg will no longer exist, because the Holy Father says that the bishop no longer has the connection to the Church.” So, from 2019, it's been three years. Does that still apply today with Bishop Georg?*

Bätzing: No, I wouldn't say that. That was the beginning of a process in the diocese, a process of discussion that led to a decision in the diocesan bodies. And this statement was basically: Yes, bishop, are you going to do it or not? And I was of the opinion, first we will consult thoroughly here. We talk to the people involved. We get involved with them. This has resulted in a resolution that says: In all areas, we want queer people to have their say and participate in decision-making. We are committed to ensuring that there are blessings for those who ask for blessings. And we link the whole thing, so that we are not alone in Frankfurt, Limburg, to what is going on in the Synodal Path, because this question is called up there. And in the meantime, I would say: there is the practice, and I will not discipline anyone who performs a blessing.

Florin: *But you yourself do not perform a blessing?*

Bätzing: So far, I have not performed a blessing.

Florin: *Due to obedience to the Pope?*

Bätzing: Yes, of course. But mainly because of a public attention. Then the attention would be on what I do and not what the two who are in front of me want.

Florin: *You spoke at the very beginning about the message, about your faith. The current state is one of discrimination. So, homosexuals are discriminated against, women are discriminated against. There is a certain idea of what the proper Catholic being should be. How does that fit with the message you believe in?*

Bätzing: Yes, I am very convinced that this is not part of the core of this message. That's why I say that **the teaching of the Catholic Church must be changed in these points. So, not only canon law, we are also talking about that. But that is only the consequence. I believe that in the real realization of what our image of God and of man is, discrimination against homosexuals, people living in relationships, should not be written in as a prohibition, but as a possibility that is met in an appreciative way.**

Florin: *You call the current state of affairs discrimination? You don't say this is justified unequal treatment, as it was in this Vatican letter?*

Bätzing: I can't say it like that anymore.

Florin: *And again: Isn't that a conflict, that you as a bishop, as a man from the hierarchy stand for this church, for this teaching?*

Bätzing: Yes, I ...

Florin: *It must tear you apart if I now assume that you are telling me the truth.*

Bätzing: Yes. So, you can assume that. And the tension is great. **There are certain questions, for example: Can women be ordained priests? There I try to keep the balancing act in such a way that I say, I state, that is my task, what is the teaching of the Church and at the same time I perceive that this teaching no longer finds acceptance among the faithful, not only in a social context, among the faithful. The *sensus fidelium*, that is, the sense of the faithful continues. This is a sign that we must take up theologically and that leads to change. And that's what I'm committed to. So, I don't sit in the armchair and say this is the way it is now, but I really give a lot of my energy to that. And I believe that changes will come.**

Florin: *This is the Synodal Path. This should lead to some goal, to a noticeable change. If the changes do not come now, who will take responsibility for what might be called failure?*

Bätzing: There we are again with the expectation management. We must also say – and have said this from the beginning in the Synodal Path: There is the category of what we as individual bishops, that is what it is all about, can change in our sovereignty. That is quite a lot. There are things that we want to change in church law, for example, in the questions: Is there a good administrative jurisdiction at the entire level of the German church? Or: Is there a disciplinary system for priests on the entire level? Or are there special courts for abuse, in order to introduce good standards in church law? That's where we want ecclesiastical law to change and have already given that to Rome.

But there will be questions – Professor Sattler as co-chair of the Women's Forum – has also said this again: We bring together the arguments that we see and play them up to the level of the universal church and say: We are prepared to work to ensure that these arguments

gain strength. We know we are in such a culturally diverse situation in the Catholic Church that unity is in some ways a fiction. And we are in the process of practicing this cultural diversity with one another. That's what the Pope means by synodality. And I think that's very, very good.

Florin: *But isn't the crisis much deeper than that, so that you can't somehow settle it with administrative justice and leadership positions for women and so on? This is a deep crisis of credibility. Cardinal Marx said a few years ago that we are no longer believed. If I take this idea a step further, credibility would also include dealing honestly with the abuse and sexualized violence that has occurred. How does that fit in with the claim you made that no bishop has honestly said what he did and what he did not do? That it was only because of courageous victims and the work of the media that a little bit came out. Why has no one said this on their own initiative?*

Bätzing: So, you can't say now that it only came out a little bit. Rather, with the MHG study, we have ...

Florin: *This also only came about as a result of media pressure.*

Bätzing: No, it came about by the decision and will of the bishops.

Florin: *But the fact that this decision came about was not because someone had already gone there in 2010, for example, and said: So, we have a big problem there and I have also personally (made myself guilty) ... there was no such thing.*

Bätzing: Hmm.

Florin: *After all, the situations were always confrontational.*

Bätzing: Yes, we wouldn't be where we are without the people affected (with abuse). They have indeed put a lot of pressure on us. And we need the pressure to continue. That is true. But look at the final report of the Federal Government Commissioner on Abuse. He says that the standards that are now in place in the Catholic Church and the amount of work that has been done to come to terms with the situation are not to be found in any other social institution. We are not like any other social institution. We have a completely different self-image and a high moral standard. That is where we have sunk so low, so to speak, that people no longer believe us. But we can only do what we have promised. And that is what we are trying to do.

Florin: *And again. I'll take the Munich report that came out at the beginning of the year. It says: More than half of the cases were already known before 2010. But then your predecessor stands up in 2010 and says: "Yes, bad, regrettable individual cases, a long time ago." How does that happen?*

Bätzing: My predecessor as president of the Bishops' Conference?

Florin: *As president of the Bishops' Conference, yes. (Bishop Marx)*

Bätzing: Yes, we come from exactly this situation: You have to protect the institution. And to give that up, I'll say, for me that has always meant exactly this turnaround when I was in charge. But for those who were in charge and had to do this about-face, it was a tremendous

journey: Give up the protection of the institution, that's the only way to get this institution somewhere again!

Florin: *The bishops were already committed to the truth.*

Bätzing: Every single one.

Florin: *Every single one.*

Bätzing: Every single one, yes. That is so.

Florin: *Do you have anything to blame yourself for personally?*

Bätzing: That is the question I ask myself often and frequently. I still have the impression that as Vicar General I acted responsibly and in accordance with those affected and also in accordance with canon law. As Rector, I have not had any responsibility in this regard, nor have I been in such a situation. But I will let myself be examined whether that is so, whether the commission that sits together in Trier and compiles what was, whether they also see it that way. I think I have done my part.

Florin: *(The Diocese) Trier is a good keyword. There we have reported frequently on the case of Karin Weißenfels, a woman who was pregnant by a priest and was then presumably urged to have an abortion by this priest and his priest friend. Anyway, they participated in that abortion. And your abuse commissioner (of the German Bishops Conference), Stephan Ackermann, recently gave the clear name of this woman, who has so far only appeared under a pseudonym. Why was there no audible criticism from the Bishops' Conference?*

Bätzing: Well, that was a serious mistake. Stephan Ackermann said so right away. In the meantime, he resigned as abuse commissioner. The main reason for this is that we need a new lineup. And I talked to him personally about it in great detail, also to know how he acts and how he sees it. I don't think anything else needed to be said about that. That was a gross mistake.

Florin: *How can something like this happen when you know how difficult it is for people affected to go public and how difficult it is to give your real name as a person affected or what it means to appear under a pseudonym. You know that this is actually a very serious breach of trust. By the way, this is also true for other victims. How can you then publicly claim: "We stand by the side of those affected"?*

Bätzing: You'll have to ask that of Stephan Ackermann. I can't answer that.

Florin: *But you say it all the time. If the climate were such that people were sensitive to those affected and tried to create protected spaces, this kind of thing would not happen.*

Bätzing: That was not allowed to happen. That was a gross mistake. But now, I say, are we in a position to say there are no more mistakes? Even with such consequences? Are we able to say that those affected will really be deeply traumatized and affected again? I can't promise you that.

Florin: *We are sitting here in Bonn, on the territory of the Archbishop of Cologne, so to speak. Now I have to ask you about the other brother bishop. During the time of your predecessor,*

Pope Francis still accepted requests for resignation. He has accepted the resignation of Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst. Do you wish that the Pope would also accept the resignation of Rainer Maria Woelki?

Bätzing: I have to tell you honestly, I have not really understood this until today. The Archbishop of Cologne himself reported that he had offered his resignation. I'm not sure if that's how it was received in Rome.

Florin: *What part of the sentence is not understandable in Rome?*

Bätzing: (laughs) I also don't know how that was communicated. So, I ...

Florin: *So, that means you don't know that at all?*

Bätzing: I don't know that.

Florin: *You didn't see a resignation request there somehow ...*

Bätzing: Neither am I informed ...

Florin: *... and you don't know anybody who did?*

Bätzing: The president of the German Bishops' Conference plays no role at all for Rome in this question. If he does not somehow intervene, he will not get any information, any at all.

Florin: *Yes, here comes the question again: What keeps you in this business then?*

Bätzing: It changes because this Church is such a good one. There is no faith without the Church. I meet people – and I go into conversation with them and have heated discussions – who tell me, because this affects me the most, that I am leaving the Church so that I can save my faith. I am not convinced that this logic is true, that someone can take his faith with him and preserve it without a community of people who also have faults, but without having this institutional foundation.

Florin: *In the archdiocese of Cologne, but also elsewhere – in Munich, in Trier and when the abuse studies of Münster, Mainz and Freiburg are published soon – more people are leaving than before. They include those you described earlier, who actually say, “A few years ago, I couldn't have imagined leaving because faith was important to me.” The canon lawyer Thomas Schüller recently said in an interview on Deutschlandfunk radio that the high number of people leaving the church in Germany simply didn't matter in Rome, they weren't interested there. You say you do care about the despair of the faithful. So what do you do?*

Bätzing: I think these are such sweeping statements. Professor Schüller himself knows that this is not true. Of course, there is a certain view from Rome on the German Church. That is – and this is what Pope Benedict basically made very strong, as someone who knows us, who always said: “The German church is weak. It's strong on the outside, it has a lot of staff, full-time staff, great Caritas, but the inner strength of faith is weak.” I believe that exactly the opposite is the case. We show how faith can be lived and organized, in a plural, free society. Someone has to replicate that first.

And the second, the second optic from Rome is: the Reformation is still in Rome's bones today. And when they hear “Synodal Path” or “together at the Lord's table”, they see tendencies: Oh dear, Reformation 2.0. That narrows the view of many who are in Rome. This

is the impression I get when I have conversations in Rome. And unfortunately, in Rome itself, in positions of responsibility, we do not have enough people who know our situation here well enough to really convey an image there on the ground that corresponds to reality.

Florin: *But it may well be that in Rome it's a kind of – I'll say – marketing concept or defense of the brand core to say: "We're a non-democratic institution and we're going to stay that way and we want to discriminate against women and we want to discriminate against homosexuals and we're not going to give up that core."*

Bätzing: I have not encountered that in any of my conversations. If that were the case, then I could no longer stay.

Florin: *Yes, but de facto it is.*

Bätzing: No. No, no. So, now you're implying a strategy, but I haven't encountered it anywhere... That would be a mischievous, really backward-looking strategy. I really can't see that.

Florin: *Maliciously, perhaps not, but deliberately. You could change it if you wanted to. The Pope could change it, with the stroke of a pen.*

Bätzing: I have not met anyone there, from the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Unity Council, with whom I speak, who does not understand the difficulties of our situation here, in the Western societies and especially in Germany. I really cannot perceive such defensiveness.

Florin: *We are having this conversation on the occasion of the Katholikentag and have now hardly come to the Katholikentag. At the Katholikentag exactly these topics will also be present and at the same time also the question: How can one be perceived as a social voice, on war, on questions of justice, etc.? Doesn't it sometimes annoy you that you should, want, have to constantly spread hope and optimism?*

Bätzing: First of all, I am an optimistic person. That also comes from my faith. I think that's a good piece of nature. But I believe in the good future that the Gospel promises. But I don't see myself in any way in the role of spreading an exuberant optimism here. I am very much looking forward to the Katholikentag – I have to say it – because it is so important, especially after the times of Corona, to look each other in the eye again, to really discuss with each other, to celebrate, to pray, to worship. I expect that to strengthen me. And that's how I think a lot of people feel. But we also have to discuss the topics that are coming up, both within the Church and, that is the strength of the Katholikentag, to get involved in the socially relevant topics. We have huge issues that also need the voice of the Catholic Church.