

Initiative »Neuer Anfang«

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German bishops formulate guidelines that break the unity of the universal Church

The New Beginning initiative documents here its largely unanswered letter to the bishops of the “Joint Conference.” The questions raised therein are of public and international interest, as the guidelines contradict traditional Church teaching.

The bishops of the “Joint Conference of the Members of the German Bishops’ Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK)” are not prepared to commit themselves to the fundamental ethical norm of Catholic sexual ethics that has been in force for 2000 years, as stated in Fiducia Supplicans:

that “the Church has always considered only sexual relations within marriage to be morally permissible...”.

The question is: Do they adhere to the fundamental ethical norm of Fiducia Supplicans?

Nine out of ten German bishops affected cannot commit to this.

As far as the practice of blessings is concerned, Fiducia Supplicans and the document are diametrically opposed. Fiducia Supplicans explicitly called for a non-ritual practice, while the guidelines suggest a ritual practice. This represents a contradiction between orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

On April 23, 2025, the Initiative Neuer Anfang (New Beginning Initiative) published a protest note against the “Guidelines for Pastoral Care for the Church Blessing of Unmarried Couples.” The document was adopted on April 4, 2025, by the “Joint Conference of the Members of the German Bishops’ Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK)” and published on April 23 on the website of the German Bishops’ Conference. In response, the New Beginning initiative sent a personal letter to the ten bishops who are members of the “Joint Conference” asking them to comment on the guidelines and their vote.

Only one bishop informed us in the biblical sense of “yes, yes; no, no” how he had voted. Berlin Archbishop Heiner Koch announced through his theological advisor that he did not wish to make his vote public. In the letter received yesterday, the advisor referred to a statement by the Archdiocese of Berlin entitled “Blessing of People.” The New Beginning initiative considers this statement to be a regrettable evasion.

One week after the letter was sent, there was still no response from (Arch)Bishops Marx, Kohlgraf, Göschl, Gerber, Bätzing, or Auxiliary Bishops Theising, Brahm, and Holtkotte.

The New Beginning initiative finds it worrying that the bishops of the Catholic Church, who are called to be public witnesses by virtue of their sacramental office and are obliged to bear witness, are hiding behind a semi-anonymous, canonically irrelevant conference. Not responding is also a response.

Due to the rejection of 80% of the bishops surveyed, the New Beginning initiative feels compelled to publish the content of the letter. This will also bring the questions raised into the public debate. In this way, all Catholics can take up these questions and address them to their bishop in an appropriate and respectful manner.

Read the full text of the letter to the bishops concerned here:

Dear Bishop NN,

On April 23, 2025, two days after the death of Pope Francis, the website of the German Bishops' Conference published, as an attachment to a press release, the "Guidelines ... for the practice of blessing non-church-married couples," which was issued by the "Joint Conference of Members of the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK)." You are a member of this "Joint Conference" and therefore had a say in the text of the "guidelines." You may have agreed, abstained, or voted against it—we do not know. Since the guidelines touch on doctrinal matters in the sense of the unity of *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, we would like to know your position as a bishop in more detail. We would like to focus on two questions:

1. The jointly (?) developed "guidelines" aim to make suggestions for "framework conditions and the form of blessings," whereby the "manner in which the blessing is conducted, the location, and the overall aesthetics" are to be considered and designed using "words from Holy Scripture" and "biblical texts appropriate to the situation," which are to be "recited and, if necessary, interpreted within the framework of the blessing." Quite obviously, the "suggestions" refer to the introduction and legitimization of carefully designed (i.e., ritual), planned (i.e., not spontaneous), parish (i.e., public-liturgical) celebrations. The handout thus explicitly contradicts *Fiducia supplicans*, which expressly prohibits organized blessing ceremonies ("...no kind of liturgical rite or similar blessings..."). *Fiducia supplicans* allows only what the Church has always allowed all Christians: the offering of blessings to "people who come spontaneously to ask for a blessing." As *Fiducia supplicans* states, their form "should not be fixed ritually by ecclesial authorities." Even if liturgical formulas are not directly prescribed, it is obvious that a liturgical-ritual practice that clearly contradicts *Fiducia supplicans* is being legitimized, recommended, and standardized. However, *Fiducia supplicans* is a binding document that demands obedience to the law and requires agreement with its doctrinal aspects. This applies a fortiori to a bishop of the Catholic Church.

Question: In your capacity as a bishop of the Catholic Church, did you approve the document?

2. *Fiducia supplicans* reaffirms the 2000-year-old fundamental conviction of the Church that "the Church has always considered only those sexual relationships to be morally licit which are lived within marriage. ..." Therefore, the Church is "not authorized ... to grant in any way a form of moral legitimacy to a union that presents itself as marriage or as an extramarital sexual practice."

Question: In your capacity as a bishop of the Catholic Church, do you fully share this teaching, which Pope Francis has reaffirmed in *Fiducia supplicans*?

We ask you these questions out of serious concern for the unity of the universal Church, of which you are the guarantor as bishop. There are already some dioceses that are withdrawing from unity with the universal Church and causing great confusion among the faithful, such as the Diocese of Osnabrück, where the following can now be read on the website (which explicitly includes the sexuality of couples outside of marriage): “By a decision of the Synodal Path in Germany, blessing ceremonies for couples who love each other are now possible. We encourage couples who wish to place their relationship under the blessing of the Church to contact their local pastor or the diocese.”

“There are many couples who are united in love, treat each other with full respect and dignity, and live their sexuality with mindfulness for themselves, for each other, and with social responsibility. However, not all of them can or want to enter into a sacramental marriage. Fortunately, there is a blessing especially for these couples. This blessing adds something to their happiness that reinforces all the good that is in their love.”

We ask you to answer the three questions personally within one week. We will consider a lack of response as a negative answer. According to the ‘guidelines,’ the clarity of your testimony to the faith of the Church has become questionable. We will make your response public, because as a bishop of the Catholic Church, you are called to be a public witness and are obliged to bear this witness. You can only withdraw from this duty by breaking with the faith community of the Church.

With kind regards

On behalf of the Initiative “Neuer Anfang”

signed

Martin Brüske Bernhard Meuser