

CONTRADICTION

German Catholics don't know who Jesus is, Bishop Bätzing fuels ignorance

ECCLESIA

21_03_2025

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Bishop Georg Bätzing, Bishop of Limburg and chair of the German Bishops' Conference, published [his Lenten Pastoral Letter](#) last Sunday. My reactions to that letter include alarm and confusion: alarm at what it says, confusion for how it then addresses those

things.

Bätzing's point of departures is this year's 1,700 anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The Council met in response to Christological heresy. Arius was promoting a vision of Christ that denied his divinity, reducing Jesus to some sort of intermediate creature who was not God. St. Athanasius, of course, battled him to affirm of Christ what a later Council would articulate as "true God and true man."

After this brief historical presentation of why Nicaea met, Bätzing moves to what is truly alarming: he cites a 2023 survey of German "Church Membership" that only 32% of respondents affirmed the proposition that "there is one God who has made Himself known [or "revealed Himself"] in Jesus Christ...."

Not even one-third of German Catholics know who Jesus Christ really is! When the 2019 Pew Survey found that only one-third of Catholics in the United States seemed to understand the Real Presence – how Jesus is present in the Eucharist – it set off sufficient alarm bells in the country's hierarchy to generate a three-year Eucharistic renewal culminating in a national Eucharistic Congress. But the "evaporation of a personal concept of God" and a "worrying thinning of central tenets of Christian belief" hardly seem to set too many Limburg bells ringing. Instead, we're told that "every generation of Christians ... should be able to answer the question: 'Who was Jesus Christ really?'"

And, to help you do that, have a heaving helping of synodality.

With all due respect, a local Church in which two-thirds of self-identified (i.e., paying their *Kirchensteuer*) Catholics can't say that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God to man needs a lot more than an extended talkfest. If Catholics do not know who it is by whose blood they have been saved and in whose name they have been baptized, the last thing they need is an intellectual bull session about what people think of these things. They need solid and rudimentary catechesis about the essentials of their faith. They are a missionary country.

Coincidentally Bätzing admitted last year that Germany is a "mission country" in which "less than half of Germany's citizens still belong to Christian denominations." Given the survey data Bätzing cited in his Lenten letter, those that still do nominally affiliate with a Christian denomination hardly seem to know why. Considering those outcomes and the fact that the Gospel has been preached for at least 1,400 years in what is today called Germany, "staying the course" seems hardly the wisest way forward.

But that apparently does not phase the Bishop of Limburg. Instead, he launches into a paean to synodality, both in the local and universal Church. Bätzing even argues it is a continuation of Nicaea (which he also called a “synod”), claiming “there have been repeated debates about essential questions of faith, fundamental moral attitudes, and the Church’s orientation in view of the present.”

Well, no. Nicaea was not intended to be a debating society; it was supposed to adopt an orthodox Christology. The recalcitrance of the heretics that subsequently required the convening of Constantinople I in 381 was not a positive aspect of “dialogue.” It was a negative thing that debilitated ecclesiastical unity for 50+ years. The final Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that definitively separated the Arians from the Christians was not an end of dialogue but the kind of essential separation of wheat from chaff necessary so that “Christians” have no doubts that “there is one God who has made Himself known in Jesus Christ.”

Bätzing admits Constantine sat the bishops down in Nicaea because he wanted a united Church. The Emperor did not expect an interesting “dialogue” but ecclesial unity through settled clarity of doctrine. But Bätzing seems less interested in doctrinal unity than in some utilitarian consequences of ecclesiastical cohesion: “I experience this frequently in conversations with social groups and political leaders. Even if they do not personally believe, they nevertheless rely on us Christians, in the spirit of Jesus, working across all denominational boundaries for justice in the world, for human cohesion, and for orientation based on fundamental values and attitudes.”

The God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ (whether or not most German Catholics know that) did not do that so that “Christians in the spirit of Jesus working across all denominational boundaries” would become some social work NGO with a spritz of holy water.

The German bishops’ conference president concludes by opining that, when he recites the Creed (from my experience in most German-speaking countries the Apostles Creed regularly substitutes for the Profession of Faith on Sundays) he “feels” the “harmony of the faith” and “its beauty.” That’s nice, but Christianity is not an aesthetic.

This author has sincere doubts about endless “dialogue” built on feelings and impressions that lack strong and solid theological foundations. Far from building up the Church, such activity seems the hiring of a permanent wrecking crew, calling into constant question settled doctrine and discipline. The Church in Germany has been on that different path for many years. If, as a result, but one-third of German Catholics can

publicly affirm that Jesus Christ is God's definitive revelation, the fruits of such a process seem to have been tested ... and are telling us the outcome is *not* good (I Thess 5:21).