

Cardinal Marx elected president of German bishops' conference

By Catholic News Agency's Vatican Observer, Andrea Gagliarducci Munich, Germany, Mar 13, 2014 / 04:42 pm (CNA/EWTN News).- Cardinal Reinhard Marx was elected head of the German bishops' conference Wednesday, succeeding Robert Zollitsch, Archbishop Emeritus of Freiburg im Breisgau.

"It is a great sign of the confidence of the bishops in Cardinal Marx that they have transferred to him this responsibility in a time of great challenge for the Church," Fr. Peter Beer, vicar general of Cardinal Marx' Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, said March 12, shortly after the vote.

"The entire archdiocese received this choice with pride and joy ... we wish him God's blessing and assistance in this task."

Cardinal Marx, 60, is considered a "rising star" among the German bishops. He was made Archbishop of Munich and Freising in 2008 and elevated to the cardinalate two years later.

Under Pope Francis, he has been named both a member of the council of eight cardinals advising on curial reform, as well as being named Coordinator of the newly-established Council for the Economy, part of the economy secretariat at the Vatican.

He is also president of the European bishops' conference.

Cardinal Marx was ordained a priest of the Paderborn archdiocese in 1979, and served as its auxiliary bishop from 1996 until he was made Bishop of Trier, where he served from 2002 until his transfer to the Munich archdiocese.

In his first speech as president of the German bishops' conference, Cardinal Marx underscored that he will not be able to undertake all the charges of his new posts, announcing he is willing to delegate some tasks.

He added that he wants to help make the voice of Catholics in Germany heard again, saying that "we have new momentum, and that has to grow," according to Deutsche Welle.

At their assembly in Muenster, the German bishops also confirmed Fr. Hans Langendoerfer, a Jesuit, as their general secretary – which could place Cardinal Marx in continuity with the work of Archbishop Zollitsch.

At the same time, Cardinal Marx is considered by German insiders to be strong enough to contrast with the Central Committee of German Catholics, a lay organization. The committee is described by some as the "executive arm" of We Are Church, an association which calls for, among other things, "the admission of women to all Church ministries."

Yet We Are Church issued a statement March 12 welcoming Cardinal Marx' appointment, in which they said the Church "can only be seen as an authentic bearer of Jesus' message if it seizes the encouraging impulse led by Pope Francis" and that the Church in Germany does not face a crisis of faith, but rather poor management by bishops.

When he addressed the Central Committee of German Catholics in 2011 during his apostolic journey to Germany, Benedict XVI noted that were a foreigner to spend a week with a typical German family, they would

find "poverty in human relations and poverty in the religious sphere," as well as a pervasive relativism.

"The Church in Germany is superbly organized," the Pope from Bavaria noted. "But behind the structures, is there also a corresponding spiritual strength, the strength of faith in the living God? We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but not enough by way of Spirit. I would add: the real crisis facing the Church in the western world is a crisis of faith. If we do not find a way of genuinely renewing our faith, all structural reform will remain ineffective."

In 2010, 150 German theologians had signed a document called "Church 2011, a necessary turning point," calling for several structural reforms, including the admission of the divorced and remarried to Communion.

In 1993, the bishops of the Rhine region signed a document advocating such admission, and the e Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then led by Cardinal Ratzinger, called them back to obedience.

The calls have been renewed in the last year – primarily by German bishops.

In October, the Freiburg archdiocese issued a document saying that some of those who are divorced and remarried may be re-admitted to Holy Communion.

The following month, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote a letter to Archbishop Zollitsch clarifying that "no pastoral directions are sanctioned which are in opposition to Church teaching," and he had made the same point in an essay published at L'Osservatore Romano the preceding month.

Now that Archbishop Zollitsch is no longer head of the German bishops' conference, it remains to be seen how Cardinal Marx will handle the debate taking place within and without the Church in Germany.

But when Cardinal Mueller's letter to Archbishop Zollitsch was made public, Cardinal Marx stated that the prefect "cannot stop the discussions" about admitting persons who are divorced and remarried to Communion.

"We will see that it is discussed very broadly; as for the result, I do not know," stated the Munich archbishop.

And according to a German insider who spoke with CNA March. 12, Cardinal Marx "will not distance himself that much from Archbishop Zollitsch's positions concerning Communion for the divorced and remarried," and "he will keep his distance from Cardinal Mueller, since they do not get on well together."

"Cardinal Marx' appointment," the source maintains, "proves that things are not going to change for the Church in Germany."

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