

‘We Have a Lot of Work to Do’

Cardinal Marx on Pope Francis, the synod and women in the church

Cardinal Reinhard Marx, archbishop of the Diocese of Munich and Freising, is head of the German bishops’ conference, a member of the Council of Cardinals that advises Pope Francis on church governance, coordinator of the Vatican’s Council for the Economy and author of *Das Kapital: A Plea for Man* (2008). Cardinal Marx delivered the annual Roger W. Heyns Lecture on Jan. 15 at Stanford University in California. This interview, which has been edited for clarity and approved by the cardinal, took place on Jan. 18 in Memorial Church at Stanford University.

Has your experience on the Council of Cardinals offered you a different perspective on the church?

I have a new responsibility. When I am interviewed—like today—and I am asked, “What are you doing on the council?” and “What does it mean to be with the pope?” I feel a higher responsibility. I don’t see the church in a new way, though. I have been a bishop for 18 years, a cardinal for five years and have been part of synods. I do see my new responsibility and the new opportunities, and also the historical moment to step forward in the church and be part of the history of the church.

What are the new opportunities?

This whole pontificate has opened new paths. You can feel it. Here in the United States everybody is speaking about Francis, even people not belonging to the Catholic Church. I have to say: The pope is not the church. The church is more than the pope. But there is a new atmosphere. A rabbi said to me, “Say to the pope that he helps us, because he strengthens all religions, not just the Catholic Church.” So it’s a new movement.

In the Council of Cardinals we have a special task to create a new constitution for the Roman Curia, to reform the



Archbishop Reinhard Marx in Münster, March 12, 2014.

Vatican Bank and to discuss many other things with the pope. But we cannot be present every day in Rome. You must see this pontificate, this way, as a wider and new step. It is my impression that we are on a new way. We are not creating a new church—it remains Catholic—but there is fresh air, a new step forward.

What challenge accompanies this new time in the church?

It is best to read “The Joy of the Gospel.” Some people say, “We don’t know what the pope really wants.” I say, “Read the text.” It does not give magical answers to complex questions, but rather it conveys the path of the Spirit, the way of evangelization, being close to the people, close to the poor, close to those who have failed, close to the sinners, not a narcissistic church, not a church of fear. There is a new, free impulse to go out. Some worry about what will happen. Francis uses a strong image: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty

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because it has been out on the streets,” rather than a church that is very clean and has the truth and everything necessary. The latter church does not help the people. The Gospel is not new, but Francis is expressing it in a new way and is inspiring many people all over the world, who are saying, “Yes, that is the church.” It is a great gift for us. It’s very important. We will see what he will do. He has been pope for only two years, which is not much time.

What can you tell us about Pope Francis, the person, from working closely with him?

He is very authentic. He is relaxed, calm. At his age, he does not need to achieve anything or prove he is somebody. He is very clear and open and without pride. And strong. Not a weak person, but strong. I think it is not so important to analyze the character of the pope, but I understand the interest.

What is very interesting is how, together with him, we will develop the path forward for the church. For example, he writes in “The Joy of the Gospel” about the relationship between the center in Rome and the conferences of bishops, and also about the pastoral work in parishes, the local churches and the character of the synods. These are very important for the future of the church. It is also very important that we have a pope. Now everybody in the world is speaking about the Catholic Church, not entirely positively, but mostly.

So Christ did very well to create the office of St. Peter. We see it. But that doesn’t mean centralism. I told the pope: “A centralized institution is not a strong institution. It is a weak institution.” The Second Vatican Council began to establish a new balance between the center and the local church, because they saw, 50 years ago, the beginning of the universal church. It is not achieved, however. We must make it happen for the first time. Now 50 years later, we see what it might be to be a church in a globalized world, a universal, globalized church. We have not yet organized it sufficiently. That is the great task for this century. The temptation is to centralize, but it will not function. The other challenge is finding a way to explain the faith in the different parts of the world. What can the synods and the local churches do together with Rome? How can we do this in a good way?

Two issues at the present synod are divorced and remarried Catholics and gay Catholics, especially those in relationships. Do you have opportunities to listen directly to these Catholics

in your present ministry?

I have been a priest for 35 years. This problem is not new. I have the impression that we have a lot of work to do in the theological field, not only related to the question of divorce but also to the theology of marriage. I am astonished that some can say everything is clear on this topic. Things are not clear. The issue is not about church doctrine being determined by modern times. It is a question of *aggiornamento*, to say it in a way that the people can understand, and to always adapt our doctrine to the Gospel, to theology, in order to find in a new way the sense of what Jesus said, the meaning of the tradition of the church and of theology and so on. There is a lot to do.

I speak with many experts—canon lawyers and theologians—who recognize many questions related to the sacramentality and validity of marriages. One question is: What can we do when a person marries, divorces and later finds a new partner? There are different positions. Some bishops at the synod said, “They are living in sin.” But others said, “You cannot say that somebody is in sin every day. That is not possible.” You see, there are questions we must speak about. We opened a discussion on this topic in the German bishops’ conference. Now the text is published. I think it is a very

good text and a good contribution for the discussion of the synod.

It is very important that the synod does not have the spirit of “all or nothing.” That is not a good way. The synod cannot have winners and losers. That is not the spirit of the synod. The spirit of the synod is to find a way together, not to say, “How can I find a way to bring *my* position through?” Rather: “How can I understand the other position, and how can we together find a new position?” That is the spirit of the synod.

Therefore it is very important that we are working on these questions. I hope that the pope will inspire this synod. The synod cannot decide; only a council or pope can decide. These questions must also be understood in a broader context. The task is to help the people to live. It is not, according to “The Joy of the Gospel,” about how we can defend the truth. It is about helping people to find the truth. That is important.

The Eucharist and reconciliation are necessary for people. We say to some people, “You will never be reconciled until your death.” That is impossible to believe when you see the situations. I could give examples. In the spirit of “The Joy of the Gospel,” we have to see how the Eucharist is medicine for the people, to help the people. We must look for ways for people to receive the Eucharist. It is not about finding ways to

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keep them out! We must find ways to welcome them. We have to use our imagination in asking, "Can we do something?" Perhaps it is not possible in some situations. That is not the question. The focus must be on how to welcome people.

At the synod, you referred to "the case of two homosexuals who have been living together for 35 years and taking care of each other, even in the last phases of their lives," and you asked, "How can I say that this has no value?" What have you learned from these relationships and does it have any bearing on sexual ethics today?

When speaking about sexual ethics, perhaps we must not begin with sleeping together, but with love, fidelity and the search for a life-long relationship. I am astonished that most of our young people, including Catholic homosexuals who are practicing, want a relationship that lasts forever. The doctrine of the church is not so strange for people. It is true. We must begin with the main points of the doctrine, to see the dream: the dream is to have a person say, a man and woman say, "You and you, forever. You and you, forever." And we as church say, "Yes, that's absolutely O.K. Your vision is right!" So we find the way. Then perhaps there is failure. They find the person, and it is not a great success. But life-long fidelity is right and good.

The church says that a gay relationship is not on the same level as a relationship between a man and a woman. That is clear. But when they are faithful, when they are engaged for the poor, when they are working, it is not possible to say, "Everything you do, because you are a homosexual, is negative." That must be said, and I have heard no objection. It is not possible to see a person from only one point of view, without seeing the whole situation of a person. That is very important for sexual ethics.

The same goes for people who are together but marry later, or when they are faithful together but only in a civil marriage. It is not possible say that the relationship was all negative if the couple is faithful together, and they are waiting, or planning their life, and after 10 years they find the way to come to the sacrament. When possible, we must help the couple to find fulfillment in the sacrament of marriage. We discussed this question at the synod, and many synod fathers share this opinion. I was not alone in this opinion.

Just last month Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, Belgium, said the church should recognize a "diversity of forms" and could bless some gay relationships based on these values of love, fidelity and commitment. Is it important for the church to discuss these possibilities?

I said in the synod that Paul VI had a great vision in "Humanae Vitae." The relationship between a man and a woman is very important. The sexual relationship in a faithful relationship is founded on the connection of procreation, giving love, sexual-

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ity and openness to life. Paul VI believed that this connection would be destroyed. He was right; see all the questions of reproductive medicine and so on. We cannot exclude this great model of sexuality, and say, "We have diversity," or "Everybody has the right to...." The great meaning of sexuality is the relationship between a man and a woman and the openness to give life. I have also previously mentioned the question of accompanying people, to see what people are doing in their lives and in their personal situation.

How will the Catholic and Protestant churches mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017? What are the possibilities for greater cooperation among our churches?


We are on a good path in Germany and at the level of the Holy See, with the Lutheran World Federation, to join our remembrances of this time. We in the Catholic Church cannot "celebrate" this anniversary, since it is not good that the church has been divided during these centuries. But we have to heal our memories—an important point and a good step forward in our relationship. In Germany I was very happy that the heads of the Protestant church are very clear that they do not want to celebrate the anniversary without the Catholics. One hundred years ago, or even 50 years ago, a Protestant bishop would not have said, "I will only celebrate when the Catholics are present." So we are planning it. "Healing Memories" will be a celebration together.

In Germany the heads of the Protestant and Catholic churches will also make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to go back to our roots. We will make a greater celebration not of Martin Luther but of Christ, a Christ-celebration that looks forward: What is our testimony now, what can we do now, what is the future of the Christian faith, and what can we do together. These are our plans for marking the 500th anniversary.

Pope Francis has called for an increased role of women in the church. What can you imagine as possible? What would help the church better fulfill its mission?

The clericalization of power is very important in the Roman Curia and the administrations of dioceses. We must look at canon law and reflect theologically to see what roles require priests; and then *all* the other roles, in the widest sense possible, must be open for lay people, men and women, but especially women. In the administration of the Vatican, it is not necessary that clerics guide all the congregations, councils and departments. It is a pity that there are no women among the lay people in the Council for the Economy. The specialists were chosen before I started as coordinator, but I will search for women to serve in this role.

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nals. It does not seem like a big thing, but great things begin with small steps, right?

I say it and repeat it also in my diocese: Please see what you can do to bring lay people, especially women, into positions of responsibility in diocesan administration. We have made a plan for the Catholic Church in Germany to have more leading positions in diocesan administrations to be filled by women. In three years we will look at what has been done.

On this issue we must make a great effort for the future, not only to be modern or to imitate the world but in realizing that this exclusion of women is not in the spirit of the Gospel. Sometimes the development of the world gives us a hint—*vox temporis vox Dei* (“the voice of the time is the voice of God”). The development in the world gives us signs, the signs of the times. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council said we must interpret the signs of the times in light of the Gospel. One of these signs is the rights of women, the emancipation of women. John XXIII said it more than 50 years ago. We are always on the way to fulfilling it.

Progress is not apparent.

Sometimes it has become worse!

What impediments need to be overcome?

Mentality! Mentality! Mentality! And the decisions of those responsible. It is clear: The bishops have to decide. The bish-

ops and the Holy Father have to begin the change. I was very often in seminars or courses for heads of companies, and that was always clear: the stairs are cleaned from above, not from below—from the top down, not the bottom up. So the leaders must begin; the chiefs must begin. The mentality must change. The church is not a business, but the methods are not so different. We have to work more in teams, in projects. The question is: Who has the resources to bring these ideas forward? Not: Who belongs to the clergy? God gives us all these people, and we say, “No, he is not a cleric, he cannot do this job.” Or “His idea is not so important.” That is not acceptable. No, no, no.

Pope Francis will make his first visit to the United States in September. What is your hope for the visit?

I am always astonished by the pope’s capacity to bring people together and to inspire them. I hope the people in the United States can experience this too. One of the main tasks and challenges for a bishop, and for the pope, is to bring people together and unify the world. The church is an *instrumentum unitatis*, an instrument and sacrament of unity among the people and between God and the people. I hope that when the pope visits the United States—and possibly the United Nations—the church can show to the world that the church will be an instrument not for itself but for the unity of the nations and the world. ▲

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