

13.3.2014 - Reuters

German Catholic bishops pick pope aide as new leader

By Alexandra Hudson

(Reuters) - Germany's Catholic bishops elected Munich Cardinal Reinhard Marx their new leader on Wednesday, picking a close associate of Pope Francis already working on Vatican reform to also guide them at home.

Marx's election in Germany, one of the richest and most influential national churches in the 1.2-billion-strong Roman Catholic world, enhanced his status among the men the pope has called on to help him revitalize the Catholic Church.

Known in Germany as a spokesman for social and economic justice, he gave his 2008 book on a just world economy the title "Das Kapital" in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the magnum opus of Karl Marx, the German founder of communism.

Marx is one of the eight cardinals Francis picked last year for a "kitchen cabinet" to advise him on reforming the Vatican and the world church. Last Saturday, the pope also named him head of a new Vatican Council for the Economy.

Franz Josef Jung, religious affairs expert for Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, called him "an organizer who is not afraid of discussion about the future of the Church."

The German church has emerged as a strong advocate of change in Vatican rules, especially to allow divorced and remarried Catholics to be readmitted to the sacraments.

Pope Francis says he won't change Church doctrine, but wants to find ways to apply it with more mercy. He has turned to another German cardinal, Walter Kasper, for theological arguments in favor of a more flexible approach.

GERMANS TAKE THE LEAD

Marx clashed with the Vatican's doctrinal chief last year, also a German, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, after Mueller reprimanded the diocese of Freiburg for suggesting that remarried divorcees could be allowed to receive the sacraments.

Mueller "cannot end the discussion" and the debate would continue "on a broad scale", Marx said in a response that would have been unthinkable back when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict, ran the once all-powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

The German bishops also took the lead last month in publishing the results they got from a worldwide survey Francis ordered into Catholics' views on issues of sexual morality.

Their blunt report said many Church teachings such as its bans on contraception, divorce, pre-marital sex, gay relations and women priests, were either unknown to the faithful in Germany or rejected as unrealistic and heartless.

The critical lay movement "We are Church" welcomed Marx's appointment and called on all bishops to support him.

"The Church can only be seen as an authentic bearer of Jesus' message if it seizes the encouraging impulse led by Pope Frances," it said in a statement.

The German Church has been shaken in recent years by the scandal of priests molesting minors and tens of thousands of Catholics have officially left it in protest.

"We are Church" said the problem facing the German Church was not a "crisis of faith" but bad management by its bishops. "Congregations are ready to campaign for a people- and future-orientated Church," it said.

Its reputation was further damaged last year when the bishop of Limburg, near Frankfurt, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, had to take a leave of absence after critics accused him of lavish spending on his new residence.

The "luxury bishop", as the media dubbed him, is accused of spending 31 million euros (\$42.99 million), six times the original estimate. The Church has investigated the issue and is expected to announce its decision on his future soon. (\$1 = 0.7212 Euros)

(Reporting by Alexandra Hudson in Berlin and Tom Heneghan in Paris. Editing by Tom Henegahn)

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/12/us-germany-catholics-marx-idUSBREA2B1HC20140312>

Zuletzt geändert am 14.03.2014