

Pope Francis' doctrine chief: Bishops conference presidents are not 'vice-popes'

BY PATRICK B. CRAINE

ROME, December 30, 2013 ([LifeSiteNews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com)) – Pope Francis piqued the curiosity of many members of the faithful in his November 24th exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he said national bishops' conferences should be granted "genuine doctrinal authority" as part of his effort to reform the papacy and decentralize authority in the Church.

The idea raised concern for many Catholics, including those active in the battle for life and family, who expressed misgivings about giving more authority to institutions that, in many countries, have often been used to undermine the Church's teachings on life and family issues.

Now the Pope's prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has weighed in on the issue. Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller says that while the conferences can exercise a certain doctrinal authority – in preparing local catechisms, for example – they exist to serve individual bishops and will never act as an intermediary between bishop and pope.



In an interview with the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* published December 22nd, Archbishop Müller said there is no such thing as "national churches," and the president of a bishops' conference cannot be a "vice-pope."

"Some interpret *Evangelii Gaudium* as if the Holy Father wants to promote a certain autonomy of the local churches, the tendency to distance themselves from Rome," he said. "But this is not possible. Particularism, like centralism, is a heresy. It would be the first step towards autocephaly."

The papacy and the role of bishop are "by divine right, instituted by Christ," but the bishops' conference, he said, "both historically and today, belong only to the ecclesiastical law," which he noted is a "human" creation.

"The presidents of the episcopal conferences, while important, are coordinators, nothing more, not vicepopes!" he said. "Each bishop has a direct and immediate relationship with the Pope."

A "decentralization" of power to the conferences would only create a new centralization, he said, in which the conference president "has all the information and the bishops are inundated with documents without time to prepare."

In a paragraph of his exhortation, Pope Francis spoke of the need for a "conversion of the papacy" and the way in which papal primacy is exercised. In particular, he said there was a need to better elaborate "a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority."

"Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach," he added.

However, bishops conferences have often been criticized for harboring dissidents or being used to try to silence strong episcopal voices in the name of 'collegiality,' and producing statements that are vague, confusing, or even misleading.

One of the most famous examples is the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1968 *Winnipeg Statement*, which dissented from *Humanae Vitae*'s prohibition of contraception by claiming that Catholics could use contraception in "good conscience" provided they had "tried sincerely" to obey Church teaching.

Most recently, the German bishops' conference has been embroiled in controversy after signaling that they would allow Communion for some Catholics who are "remarried" despite an existing Catholic marriage.

Many fear that increasing power at the conferences could undermine the efforts of outspoken bishops within their dioceses, and increase the tendency for bishops to yield their proper authority to the conference.

In the lead-up to the 2008 U.S. election, Bishop Joseph Martino, then the ordinary in Scranton, was forced to intervene when a liberal Catholic group at a parish used some vague lines from the USCCB document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* to justify voting for a pro-abortion candidate. "No USCCB document is relevant in this diocese," the bishop said, noting that he had produced his own pastoral letter insisting that Catholics

must vote pro-life.

Perhaps the most incisive criticism of modern bishops' conferences was offered by Pope Benedict XVI himself before his election.

In *The Ratzinger Report*, his 1985 book-length interview with journalist Vittorio Messori, Cardinal Ratzinger explained that while the Second Vatican Council sought to restore the role of individual bishops, in practice the post-Conciliar period saw a reduction of their role because of the greater emphasis on the conferences.

"The decisive new emphasis on the role of the bishops is in reality restrained or actually risks being smothered by the insertion of bishops into episcopal conferences that are ever more organized, often with burdensome bureaucratic structures," he said.

Echoing Müller's observation that the conferences are of human origin, Cardinal Ratzinger said they "have no theological basis, they do not belong to the structure of the Church, as willed by Christ, that cannot be eliminated; they have only a practical, concrete function."

"No episcopal conference, as such, has a teaching mission: its documents have no weight of their own save that of the consent given to them by the individual bishops," Cardinal Ratzinger added.

To what extent Müller's view reflects that of Pope Francis, and to what extent it will impact the discussion going forward, is unclear.

The prefect made similar remarks at the end of September, days after Pope Francis confirmed him in his post.

Bishops' conferences lack "a teaching competency over and above the authority of individual bishops," he said, according to *The Tablet*. "They are not a third authority between the Pope and the bishops. So I don't think we will see a sort of federalist reform similar to that in the Federal Republic [of Germany] where key competences are relayed from the central state to the individual states. That is not how the Church is constituted!"