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German theologians angered by Vatican's refusal to approve Jesuit college rector

Des théologiens allemands mis en colère par le refus du Vatican de reconduire le recteur d'un college jésuite.

Father Ansgar Wucherpfennig SJ has not been reconfirmed as rector of Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology due to his positive views on homosexuality

Le Père Ansgar WUcherpfennig sj n'a pas été reconduit comme recteur du Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology à cause de ses positions sur l'homosexualité

The Vatican's refusal to allow a popular Jesuit priest to continue serving as head of a prestigious Catholic university in Germany has caused outrage among local Church officials, including the bishop in the diocese where the institute is located and the provincial superior of the Society of Jesus.

Ce refus du Vatican a blessé l'Eglise locale, y compris son évêque

Two German dailies this week made public for the very first time that the Congregation for Catholic Education has decided not to renew its *confirmatio* of Father Ansgar Wucherpfennig SJ as rector of the Jesuit-run Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt am Main.

Veritatis gaudium, the apostolic constitution Pope Francis issued last December on ecclesiastical universities, states that the rector of such an institute must be "appointed by, or at least receive confirmation (*confirmatio*) from, the Congregation for Catholic Education".

In fact, the 52-year-old Wucherpfennig had received Vatican approval two previous times dating back to 2014. But he failed to secure confirmation after Sankt Georgen's faculty overwhelmingly re-elected him last February to a third consecutive two-year term.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* reported the Vatican's decision on Oct. 8, although it was actually made several months ago.

The two dailies said the refusal was due to Father Wucherpfennig's positive views on homosexuality and same sex blessings, which were published in a 2016 newspaper interview.

Deux quotidiens rapportent que le refus est dû à l'opinion du Père Wucherpfennig sur l'homosexualité et sur les bénédiction de couple du même sexe.

They also said the Vatican is demanding that the Jesuit recant those views as well as his support of ordaining women deacons.

Le Vatican lui demande de se rétracter sur ces positions ainsi que sur son avis concernant l'ordination de femmes diacres.

News of the Rome office's decision has caused anger and indignation among German-speaking theologians and other Church leaders.

In addition, Father Johannes Siebner SJ, the superior of the Jesuit Province in Germany, and Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg have joined the professors of Sankt Georgen in a strong public statement of support for Wucherpfennig.

Father Siebner accused Vatican officials of acting like a "Byzantine court." Speaking to katholisch.de on Oct. 8 he said: "It is as if they had not heard of or understood the ongoing discussion over abuse of power."

The Jesuit superior revealed that the Congregation for Education had informed him last June that it would not confirm Father Wucherpfennig solely because of views on homosexuality the rector had expressed in the 2016 interview.

Speaking to the *Frankfurter Neue Presse* in October of that year, Wucherpfennig said it was his "impression" that the Church's negative attitude towards homosexuality went "back to deeply ingrained and, in part, misleadingly worded Bible passages."

Wucherpfennig dit son sentiment que l'attitude négative de Rome quant à l'homosexualité est profondément enracinée et s'appuie, partiellement, sur une lecture erronée de certains passages bibliques.

He pointed to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, which he said reflects the ancient world's view that homosexual relationships "were relationships of strong dependency and subservience."

The priest concluded that "love should be an egalitarian relationship, not an asymmetric one," and added, "that, in my view, is what St. Paul really wanted to say."

Le prêtre conclut (quant à la lettre de St Paul aux Romains) que l'amour doit être une relation d'égalité, pointant ce que Paul a réellement voulu dire.

Father Wucherpfennig told German state television on Oct. 9 that he could not understand the Vatican's reservations concerning the prolongation of his term as rector of Sankt Georgen.

He said the Vatican's refusal to reconfirm him would be harmful to gays and lesbians, who have only recently begun to perceive the Church as becoming more open towards them.

He said it was still a very delicate situation, but gays and lesbians are beginning to find their way into the Church. "And now the Church has come down on them with a hammer," the Jesuit priest said.

He said he had relied on Pope Francis' comparatively liberal comments on how homosexuals should be treated.

"And so, I cannot understand why the brakes are being put on, especially by his closest employees in the Vatican of all people," the priest said.

Wucherpfennig's immediate superior, Father Siebner, said he feared someone from the so-called "turbo-Catholic" circles had sent the 2016 interview to officials in Rome, where it lay in a drawer for a year-and-a-half only to be pulled out later to block the rector's re-appointment.

"That is, of course, pure speculation on my part," the Jesuit provincial admitted.

"I have a feeling that shadow boxing is taking place, since what Wucherpfennig expressed as a possible consideration is perfectly plausible. The convoluted way the Vatican speaks about homosexuality doesn't work any longer and is also obsolete.

“Here we have a theologian who says, ‘Let us look and see what St. Paul meant and what historical-critical New Testament research makes of this,’” Father Siebner said. The Jesuit provincial also said he was extremely annoyed that there had been no dialogue whatsoever with officials at the Vatican office for education.

Le provincial jésuite rapporte son agacement devant l’absence de dialogue avec Rome.

He said the normal procedure would have been to ask Father Wucherpfennig to clarify what he had stated.

Instead, they simply declared that the congregation’s *confirmatio* had been refused and demanded that Wucherpfennig publicly declare that he recognized church teaching on reserving the priesthood for men and also on “the doctrine concerning the moral assessment of homosexual acts.”

Father Siebner said he had explained to officials at the Vatican congregation that if Wucherpfennig were forced to publicly recant it would cause scandal since the priest had not contradicted fundamental church teaching.

“He did not deny the Trinity or the Virgin Birth, for example,” Father Siebner said.

The provincial superior reiterated his full support for Father Wucherpfennig and expressed hope that the Vatican would eventually confirm his election as rector.

In the meantime, Siebner has appointed a (temporary) pro-rector to lead Sankt Georgen.

Thomas Schüller, a canon law professor at Münster University, called the Vatican’s refusal to reconfirm Wucherpfennig an obvious affront to the Jesuit order, which is trying to move the Church forward by facing the questions of the time.

Le refus du Vatican est un affront aux Jésuites qui cherchent à faire bouger l’Eglise face aux défis de notre temps.

The 57-year-old canonist told domradio.de it was, at the same time, an insult to Pope Francis and Cardinal Luis Ladaria (head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), both of whom are Jesuits.

C’est de même une insulte au pape François et Cardinal Ladaria (préfet de la Congrégation pour la doctrine de la foi) tous deux jésuites.

Thomas Andonie, chairman of the Association of Young German Catholics (BDKJ), told katholisch.de on Oct. 9. the Vatican’s move was an “outrageous procedure.”

The 27-year-old, who is one of more than 30 young people who are auditors at this month’s Synod of Bishops assembly, said: “While we at the Youth Synod in Rome are quite openly exchanging views — according to the pope’s express wish — we now know how Rome treats priests who courageously make clear what young people wish of the Church.”

Thomas Andonie, 27 ans, un des 30 jeunes auditeurs au synode sur la jeunesse, s’est exprimé : « Nous sommes totalement ouverts aux échanges - selon le souhait de François – nous savons comment Rome traite les prêtres qui courageusement transmettent ce que les jeunes souhaitent de l’Eglise ».

Adonie has spoken out strongly for the need to discuss clerical sexual abuse at length at the Synod and has accused Church representatives of abusing their power.

“They are trying to sideline people, but that is something the BDKJ firmly rejects,” he emphasized.