Cardinal Brandmüller:
Demands of German Synodal Way
'Clearly Contradict the Catholic Faith'

In a March 3 essay entitled 'Quo Vadis, Germania,' Cardinal Walter Brandmüller explained what he saw as the historical 'roots of the crisis'



Cardinal Walter Brandmüller
(photo: Edward Pentin / National Catholic Register)

Edward Pentin Vatican City March 2022

The Synodal Way of the Church in Germany is on the "wrong track that is lost in nothingness," rooted in the heresy of modernism that theologians have yet to properly address, and is destined to fail, Cardinal Walter Brandmüller has said.

In a commentary published March 3 on the German-speaking website *Kath.net* and titled "Quo vadis, Germania" ("Where are you going, Germany?"),
the German Church historian said the Synodal Way was making "sensational demands" that

“clearly contradict the authentic Catholic faith, the Church’s hierarchical-sacramental constitution and her binding moral teaching.”

Cardinal Brandmüller was responding to draft texts approved at a plenary meeting of the Synodal Way in Frankfurt in early February. The participants, who included most of Germany’s bishops, voted in large majorities to support same-sex union blessings; changes to the Catechism on homosexuality and the ordination of women priests; priestly celibacy to be optional in the Latin Church; and lay involvement in the election of new bishops.

“The fact that not a few of these ‘yes’ votes came from bishops indicates the seriousness of the situation — and raises fundamental questions,” Cardinal Brandmüller observed. The bishops, he added, must be asked if they realized they were “openly contradicting the truths of the faith which they had repeatedly sworn to faithfully preserve and proclaim.”

“The community of the faithful has a right to this!” Cardinal Brandmüller insisted.

The former president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences said on the one hand it was “no surprise” that among the “reforms” discussed were those such as the abolition of priestly celibacy and the admission of remarried divorcees to Holy Communion. These, he said, have been “lurking underground since the Würzburg Synod of 1971-1975” — a meeting aimed at implementing reforms of the Second Vatican Council but which the Holy See never approved.

But Cardinal Brandmüller, 93, noted that what is new is that “practiced homosexuality is recognized as morally permissible,” and that there is “no real difference between bishops, priests, deacons, and that ‘only’ the baptized and confirmed should be recognized” — a belief, he said, that “corresponds completely to the teachings of Martin Luther.”

This was contrary to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the cardinal argued, which taught that the “hierarchical priesthood of the consecrated” differs from the “universal priesthood of the baptized, not merely in degree but in essence.” Thus, he continued, “the Frankfurt assembly overrules 2,000 years of practice and a general council!”

Regarding the ordination of women, Cardinal Brandmüller said this has “never been considered possible in 2,000 years because, as John Paul II has stated with infallible judgment, the Church has no authority” to ordain women.

Such “spectacular demands,” he observed, “have aroused as much lively enthusiasm in the circles of functionary Catholicism as they have horror among ordinary Catholics.”

Cardinal Brandmüller, whom Benedict XVI elevated to cardinal in 2010 on account of his service to the Church as an eminent historian, then went on to explain what he saw as the “roots of the crisis that came to light in Frankfurt.”

He said it was important to look back to the end of the 19th century when the question “what actually is religion?” was posed and the phenomenon of “modernism” emerged. Coined by Pope St. Pius X, the cardinal said modernism “was a heterogenous group of ideas and approaches that were — and still are — incompatible with the Catholic faith in various ways.”

These were attempts by thinkers to help “illuminate the meaning of human existence, to cope with the experience of man’s finiteness.” But there was another “constitutive element,” he added, “that of evolution.” Cardinal Brandmüller explained that people and society became seen as subjects of evolution — an ever-evolving “religious consciousness” so that faith and the practice of the faith are to be formulated “on their momentary stages of development” and revolve around the ego in a “solitary monologue.”

The evolutionary approach, the cardinal said, also derived from the 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his “three-step process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.” It means that what today “could be true, yesterday was false, and vice versa, in order to be questioned again in the next step — and so on,” he said.

Cardinal Brandmüller said theologians should have urgently dealt with these movements in a serious and dispassionate way, as Pope St. Pius X did with his 1907 encyclicals *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* and *Lamentabili Sane*.

“But this is precisely what didn’t happen,” he said, adding that world events, including the World Wars and their aftermath, led theology to become less geared to the “fundamental” and more to “contemporary movements.”
Thus, he said, there was never a “thorough and comprehensive examination of the complex phenomenon of modernism” and the “problem continued to smolder underground.”

He said the crisis “finally erupted, in the run-up to Vatican II” when the theological school of thought, *Nouvelle Théologie,* that aimed among other things at steering Catholic theology away from criticism of modernism, took hold. He said Pope Pius XII responded to this in his 1950 encyclical
Humani Generis
but “soon after, the now-graying generation of [cultural revolution of] 1968, which again set the tone in Frankfurt, attempted to change the course of events.”

This has led, he said, to the German Church becoming a non-governmental organization with humanitarian and cultural goals, a “stately artifact, limited to the here-and-now, circling around itself, superfluous.”

But man, he said, has an “infinite spirit” and religion is the way that he responds to his existence, “recognizes his Creator and meets him.” Cardinal Brandmüller wondered if the “synodalists” are unaware of this and asked if they realize they are “on a wrong track that is lost in nothingness.”

“In the end, the result of the ‘Synodal Way’ enterprise is fatal,” he predicted, and observed how the Frankfurt texts go beyond heresy in that they fail to mention “God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The cardinal termed this “Atheism in Christianity” — the title of a 1968 book by the Marxist writer, Ernst Bloch, also a citizen of Frankfurt.

By contrast, Cardinal Brandmüller said the Judeo-Christian understanding is “not the result of human self-experience or existential reflection,” but rather the “revelation of the Creator to his creature, man,” achieved through the “incarnate Son of the Living God.” This is not “based on ideas, myths, etc., but on verifiable historical facts,” Cardinal Brandmüller said.

And yet, “all this played no role” at the synodal assembly in Frankfurt, and there was “no

mention of death, judgement and eternal life," Cardinal Brandmüller said, describing this realization "astonishing and dismaying."

"What is understood there by religion, Christianity, the Catholic Church?" the cardinal asked. "Indeed it is atheism in Christianity," he said: "Is the 'Church,' indeed then not simply a socio-cultural superfluous NGO, one among so many others?"

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God," the cardinal concluded, quoting Hosea 14:2.

Cardinal Brandmüller, one of four cardinals who in 2016 signed the *dubia* that questioned Pope Francis on the moral theology of his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia,* is the latest prominent churchman to speak out in recent weeks against the Synodal Way.

His commentary follows a public fraternal correction from Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, the president of the Polish bishops' conference, and a critical open letter from the Nordic bishops' conference, both addressed to the president of the German bishops' conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing.