

German Catholic Bishops Elect Lay Woman as Conference General Secretary

Theologian Beate Gilles, 50, is the first woman and lay person to hold the top bishops' conference post.

By La Croix International staff.

Catholic bishops in Germany have elected a lay woman theologian for the first time as the conference's top administrator to implement their decisions.

The German Catholic Bishops' Conference (DBK) on Tuesday elected Beate Gilles as general secretary of their Bonn-based conference, Deutsche Welle reported.

Gilles will now be the public face for the German Catholic bishops who represent some 23 million-member Catholics who have for some time now called for more leadership roles for women.

Besides being the first woman to hold the top bishops' conference post Gilles is also the first layperson. "This is a sign within the Catholic Church, I'm very aware of that," Gilles said.

Gilles, 50, besides being a theologian is also an avid runner. "I am an endurance athlete," Gilles told Deutsche Welle. "That means I know that a marathon is not decided in its 40 kilometers, but rather by the 1,000 kilometers in training — that's my distance."

Gilles takes over as general secretary on July 1 and will be responsible for implementing decisions made by the bishops. She was elected on Tuesday during the bishops' conference gathering being held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the country's Catholic episcopal conference, described Gilles' election as a "strong signal that the bishops are fulfilling their pledge to advance women into leadership positions."

Gilles currently heads a department for youth, family, and childcare in Bishop Bätzing's Limburg diocese. Before that, Gilles in Stuttgart headed a Catholic educational institution.

Gilles, unmarried, succeeds Father Hans Langendörfer, who for 24 years was the conference's general secretary.

From July, Gilles will also manage the Federation of Dioceses of Germany (VDD), the umbrella body coordinating the German Church's activities at federal level.

The VDD has an annual budget of around €120 million (\$146 million) which represents around 2% of the total resources of Germany's 27 Catholic dioceses and is overseen by the bishops' conference president.