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## Katholikentag: German Catholics convene to discuss faith, peace and politics

The 103rd Day of German Catholics, or Katholikentag, has opened in Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia, in the heart of Germany. Federal President **Frank-Walter Steinmeier** (*pictured below*) attended the opening ceremony on the cathedral square last evening (the event runs until 2 June). Some 20,000 participants from all over Germany are expected to attend, including religious and political dignitaries, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz and several government ministers. Some 500 events are scheduled through Sunday, including a variety of panel discussions on current, socio-political and ecclesial issues. The motto of the Catholic Day is "The Future Belongs to the Peacemakers". Questions of war and peace, the development of digital technology, democracy, climate change, social justice and the fight against extremism feature on the program, as underlined by the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), which is hosting the event. **Comprehensive dialogue.** The umbrella organisation of German lay Catholics has co-organised the Catholic Day with the host diocese of Erfurt. Some 150 cultural events including musical performances, plays, dance and cabaret are planned alongside a wide range of religious activities. Bishop **Ulrich Neymeyr** of Erfurt pointed out that the Katholikentag "sees not only Christians as their partners in dialogue but all people." In Thuringia, where only about a quarter of the population identifies as Christian, this is a daily reality. **Elections and peace.** The fact that the Katholikentag takes place in the middle of a year with many rounds of elections - around the world, at the European level and at the local level - makes the event especially significant, in spite of the small number of participants (many more people attended in the past years). Last Sunday the state of Thuringia, of which Erfurt is the capital, held local elections. European and local elections will take place in eight other Länder on 9 June, a week after the Katholikentag event. Regional elections are scheduled for September in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. The far-right populist party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland - Alternative for Germany) is well ahead in the polls in all three federal states. The fact that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classifies the AfD's regional branches in Saxony and Thuringia as right-wing extremist does not diminish its popularity. However, the Katholikentag has clearly spoken out against the presence of AfD delegates as panel speakers in the dialogue sessions. The Catholics in Erfurt "cannot be neutral, they have to take a clear stand", the president of the ZdK, **Irme Stetter-Karp**, repeated in the last few days: "It is our firm belief that peace requires more than the absence of war. Peace needs people who, day after day, do their utmost to ensure the eradication of violence, exclusion and hatred." **Current affairs.** According to the organisers, the Katholikentag resumes its function as a "source of motivation" for the Catholic community, which is facing increasing secularisation in the country. The dialogue between Catholics and other Christian denominations is equally important. "It encourages a spirit of belonging to the community and strengthens solidarity within the Church," they said. The event also provides "a platform where believers, church organisations and communities can share their experiences and ideas." Simultaneously, Katholikentag provides an opportunity to discuss current social and political issues from a religious perspective. Issues such as social justice, peace, environmental protection and the protection of human life "bear special topical relevance, and require not only a forum for debate, but also firm stands" on the part of the Christian community.

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