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Vatican strips Austria's reform priest of 'monsignor' title

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | Dec. 4, 2012
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The Vatican has stripped the founder of the Austrian Priests' Initiative [1], Fr. Helmut Schüller [2], of the title of monsignor.

When the Vatican announced the news Nov. 29, Schüller told the Austrian Press Agency that Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna had informed him of the action of the Vatican's Secretary of State "a short time ago." The decision to strip him of title had "not shaken him," he said.

Pope John Paul II gave Schüller the honorary title of "Monsignor, Chaplain of His Holiness" when he became president of Austrian Caritas in 1991, Schüller said. He had never acquired or worn the cassock with purple-piped buttonholes and the purple silk cincture that come with it, he said.

Schönborn's spokesman, Michael Prüller, confirmed that the Vatican had informed the Vienna archdiocese of the decision.

"This was a decision taken in Rome and has nothing to do with us," he said, adding the archdiocese did not wish to evaluate it in any way.

Although the Vatican gave no grounds for the decision, Schüller said he presumed it was because of the Austrian Priests' Initiative's "Appeal for Disobedience." Issued in June 2011 and now endorsed by about 425 priests -- that is about one in nine of Austria's 3,800 priests, the appeal calls for practical action on a list of pastoral concerns, such as allowing divorced and remarried Catholics to receive sacraments and support for the ordination of women and married men. It has inspired the establishment of similar groups in Germany, Ireland, France, the United States and Australia.

Schüller and the group have resisted repeated calls from Schönborn, other members of the Austrian bishops' conference and even Pope Benedict XVI to rescind the appeal.

At this year's Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday in St Peter's Basilica, Benedict clearly rebuked [3] the "Appeal for Disobedience" in public. Although referring merely to "a group of priests from a European country," the pope said: "We would like to believe the authors of this appeal when they say they are motivated by concern for the church and are convinced that it is necessary to challenge the slow pace of institutions with drastic measures in order to open up new avenues to bring the Church up to date."

"But is disobedience a way to do this?" he asked.

Schönborn, who is also president of the Austrian bishops' conference, has resisted sanctioning the group beyond not allowing them leadership posts in the archdiocese, saying the Austrian bishops "continue to believe in the possibility of personal dialogue."

But in May, he signalled that patience may be wearing thin. "On the other hand, there is the danger that the faithful will become confused. That is why I think the time has come for a decision," he said.

Last month, Schüller announced that the Austrian Priests' Initiative was planning an international meeting of all the reform groups for 2013. Its international network had grown considerably, Schüller told the Austrian daily *Der Standard* on Nov. 25.

"The argument that this is 'just a group of Austrian priests' is now off the cards," he told the Austrian Press Agency. Priestly celibacy and women's ordination were not "typical European issues," and a worldwide networking therefore made sense, he said.

"2013 will be the year we go international," he said. The meeting will probably be in Germany, he said.

Five days later, the Vatican stripped him of his monsignor title.

The well-known Italian Vaticanist Marco Politi told Austrian state television's religious affairs program "Orientierung" on Sunday that the Austrian priests' "Appeal for Disobedience" had obviously "touched a raw nerve" in the Vatican.

[Christa Pongratz-Lippitt is an Austrian correspondent for the London-based weekly Catholic magazine *The Tablet*.]

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story misstated the number of Austrian priests who support the Appeal for Disobience. The correct number is 427. Austria has 3834 priests.

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