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Push for reform grows in Austria

by Christa Pongratz-Lippitt



Msgr. Helmut Schüller (Newscom/Getty Images/AFP/Ernst Weingsrtner)

VIENNA, AUSTRIA -- As Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna prepares to meet privately for a second time with leaders of a group of priests who are pushing a reform agenda for the Catholic church, other Catholic leaders are calling for wider discussion of church reform.

In June, a group of about 300 priests, called the Austrian Priests' Initiative, issued an 'Appeal to Disobedience,' in which they pledged to take practical action on a list of reforms that included giving Communion to everyone who approaches the altar in good faith, including divorced Catholics who have remarried without an annulment, and publicly speaking out in support of the ordination of women and married men.

Membership in the group has grown to about 400, roughly one in 10 active priests, and some 12,000 lay Catholics are said to support the initiative.

Schönborn met Aug. 10 with leading members of the initiative and countered the priests' 'Appeal to Disobedience' with an 'Appeal for Unity.' Schönborn reminded the priests that when they were

ordained, they promised the bishop "reverence and obedience."

Anyone who has come to the decision "that Rome is on a wrong track," he said, must leave the Catholic church.

This sparked media reports of schism in the Austrian church, which caused the archdiocesan spokesman Michael Prüller to tell Catholic News Service, "The situation is not as dramatic as the Austrian media make it seem."

While some saw the cardinal's statement as an ultimatum, Prüller said, "this is nothing like that. There will be an ongoing debate and there has to be an ongoing discussion of the underlying issues."

Schönborn was reportedly to meet the Priests' Initiative leaders again Sept. 10.

But the leaders of Austria's Conference of Religious Superiors of Men want that meeting to be public and encompass a larger group. Because there is talk of schism, they say, the controversy can no longer be solved by Schönborn alone.

There are about 40 male religious superiors in Austria, and their opinions carry weight because religious priests account for about half of all parish priests in Austria.

The head of the male superiors, Abbot Maximilian Fürnsinn of the Augustinian Monastery of Herzogenburg, says a church summit is called for because certain of the reforms the Priests' Initiative is pressing for -- such as "allowing older married men to say Mass" -- are "at least worthy of discussion."

Abbot Martin Felhofer of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Schlägl said, "Everyone -- bishops, abbots, religious and representatives of the Austrian Priests' Initiative -- must sit down and discuss these problems together."

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The director of Caritas Austria, Franz Küberl, told Austrian state radio Sept. 3 that the church reform debate was not confined to Austria. The same issues are being discussed in many countries. He was in favor of ordaining women deacons, he said, and as far as obedience was concerned, the main thing "surely" was to obey the Gospel.

The head of Austrian Catholic Action, Luitgard Derschmidt, said that she fully understands that the members of the Priests' Initiative "have had enough" and that Catholic Action shares many of their concerns. Austrian Catholic Action is the umbrella group for seven Catholic lay organizations that represent approximately 500,000 lay Catholics.

They were "not so much calling for disobedience but rather for a higher obedience to conscience and to God," Derschmidt said. Mandatory priestly celibacy was a rule that could be relaxed, she said, adding that that many Catholic theologians see no reason why women could not be ordained.

The most recent polls taken among Austrian Catholics show that 90 percent want this controversy solved without there being winners or losers.

The polls also show that only 14 percent of Austrian priests think they are duty bound to obey church leaders and only 14 percent of Austrians accept the argument that women can never be ordained as Jesus

only ordained men.

But 70 percent believe the church and its leaders are "an important moral authority."

Ninety-six percent say that the exodus from the Austrian Catholic church would be "huge" if members of the Priests' Initiative are suspended.

The Austrian Priests' Initiative was founded in 2006 by Msgr. Helmut Schüller, one of Austria's best-known churchmen and media personalities. He is a former president of Caritas Austria and former vicar general -- under Schönborn -- of the Vienna archdiocese.

Schüller, 58, was ombudsman of the Vienna archdiocese's center for priestly sexual abuse and child protection from 1996 to 2005. Since then he has been the chaplain for students at Vienna University and parish priest of Probstdorf, a small market town north of Vienna.

The initiative decided to make their "Call to Disobedience" public in June, Schüller said, because parish priests have been expected to live schizophrenic lives for so long that it was wearing them out.

The hierarchy tolerates widespread disobedience at the grass roots, he said. For instance, it is a well-known fact that Catholics, even many of the young who go to World Youth Days, widely use contraception although it is forbidden by church law, he said. As a result, birth rates in Catholic countries like Poland and Austria are among the lowest in Europe if not in the world, but the bishops refuse to discuss such problems openly, thus leaving parish priests to teach one thing but practice or tolerate another, Schüller said.

Since June, Schüller's group has been in touch with similar groups in Ireland and the United States, he said. From the beginning, the group has had close contact with like-minded priests in Germany, where there is a similar initiative that is, however, more hesitant to go public than the Austrian initiative, according to Schüller.

He has received thousands of e-mails from all over the world, he said. Most have been supportive, but there has also been some harsh criticism, with people accusing the priests of promoting a schism and telling them to leave the Catholic church.

Schönborn's call for "reverence and obedience" triggered a heated, nationwide debate on obedience and disobedience in the church, which has a sad history in Austria.

It was pointed out, for example, that in April 1938 the Austrian bishops called on Catholics to vote for Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria. Most obeyed the bishops, but a few, like Franz Jägerstätter, refused. Jägerstätter did not leave the church. He was, moreover, many years later beatified for his disobedience.

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

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