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Interview with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn

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NCR Today

Synod of Bishops 2012

Rome — Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, is among the most interesting figures in the global church -- an intellectual and theological protégé of Pope Benedict XVI, but also known for his willingness to make surprising pastoral judgments, whether it's allowing an openly gay man to serve on a parish council, approving a sweeping plan to cluster or close almost two-thirds of his parishes, or pursuing dialogue with a priests' insurrection in Austria. Schönborn, 67, has been among the most-cited figures at the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization, and on Oct. 23 he spoke to *NCR* on the margins of the synod.

The following is a transcript of the interview.

Interview with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn

Oct. 23, 2012

I've spoken to several people in the synod who were impressed with what you said about these gatherings being a chance for bishops to talk to each other about their pastoral challenges.

At the very beginning of the synod, I suggested that we share, not so much challenges, but our experiences. As successors of the apostles, we are called to be the first evangelizers. We all have experiences of all kinds of joys, fears, successes, failures, and so on, in evangelizing. We all asked ourselves, "Do I really evangelize?" I preach a lot, I'm in the parishes, I write pastoral letters, and so on, but what's meant by the "New Evangelization" is not only the daily pastoral work, which obviously we have to do and we do it with joy, but what Pope Benedict repeatedly says to us, encourages us to do, is to reach out to those who no longer have, or never have had, any direct contact with the gospel. This is the

real challenge of the New Evangelization. I was very moved by some examples in the synod of real shared experiences of our work of evangelization. Of course, we also have to talk about all the questions of secular society, of globalization, of the social dimension, and all these subjects, and I think we've had a very rich menu about what's going on throughout the world. The situations are all different, but nonetheless also more and more similar. Some of us, however, also gave really personal testimonies, and that was very moving.

In that spirit, let me ask about a couple of your recent pastoral experiences in Austria. One is the priests' movement, what some call the 'priests' rebellion.' Where do things stand now in terms of your relationship with that group?

I think all the Austrian bishops have normal and regular contact with the priests who are in that movement. In my diocese, some of the leading priests of that movement are in the diocesan priests' council. Just at the beginning of this month, we talked very intensely about the questions and the challenges of this group. We all share many of these. The problems and questions they raise are real questions from the field. The issue is how to respond, how to take up these challenges, and I dare to say that the majority of the priests, as well as we bishops, as we have shown in our recent pastoral letter, think that some of the proposed solutions [from this movement] fall short. We have to dig deeper, to see these questions in a vaster context. We have to see it as a common challenge for all the faithful, priests, bishops, and laity, to deal with a situation in which in many respects we have become a minority, even if by numbers we may still be the majority. We have to learn to deal with this situation in a creative way.

Your view is that tinkering with church structures won't cut it?

Exactly. We need to take up this challenge [of church structures], because it's one part of the reality. Like many other European dioceses have done in the last two decades, for example, we're on our way to restructure our pastoral work.

We'll come to that in a moment, but first let me ask: However challenging it may be, has this priests' movement also done some good for the church in Austria?

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I have trust in them, because they're priests close to the people who share their worries. Sometimes, perhaps, I would say their perspective needs to be enlarged. The challenge is to introduce their grassroots perspective to other aspects which are simply not present in their reflections and proposals. For example, the whole question of secularization doesn't appear in their proposals, and that's astonishing to me. We are living in the midst of a radical secularization, and our parishes are now minorities even in the villages.

You're committed to continuing the conversation?

Absolutely. In our dialogue with the Roman Curia, which is going very well and is very cordial, that's been upheld, especially in light of what the Holy Father said in his Holy Thursday homily. He said there is only one possibility, which is to go forward together. Of course, there have to be limits. All the bishops in Austria have said very clearly, for instance, that you can't call for disobedience and also hold a major diocesan job. Every business person understands that these two things are incompatible. I've acted in certain circumstances to say, well, here's the limit, and you have to make your choice.

Let's move to the restructuring of the archdiocese, which includes closing or clustering two-thirds of your parishes. How has that been received?

It's in the beginning, and the reception has been mixed. On the one hand, I feel that many priests and lay people are glad that something is moving, because they know stagnation would not be a solution. It would only increase depression and discouragement. We all know that changes have to be made. Let me give you an example: the city of Vienna has 172 parishes, which is notably more than we had in 1945. The number of Catholics, however, has shrunk to less than half of what we had then. We have more parishes, churches, and buildings, but significantly fewer Catholics. We have to do something, and we're trying to do it the right way. For instance, we've proposed to give churches to other Christian churches which are growing, such as the Copts, the Serbian Orthodox, and the Romanian Orthodox, who are all getting bigger. Instead of selling churches or simply closing them, we want them to stay open. I also don't rule out that what I've seen happen in Berlin could happen in Vienna, which is that some churches the diocese had to close for financial reasons are taken over by the laity and become vibrant centers of spiritual life on another level.

That's another point about your restructuring plan. It's not just closing parishes, but you've also called for greater lay involvement.

The key idea, which has been extremely present in this synod, is the small Christian community. Many, many bishops from around the world have spoken about the small Christian communities. We see the need, and we have the desire, not to lose communities but to increase their number. We're forced to reduce the number of parish structures, with all their administration and expenses, but we want to favor a growing number of small Christian communities led by laity – laity who aren't full-time, who aren't bureaucrats, but volunteers. These are people living in the field, who do what laity in many parishes and other communities already do, which is to take responsibility for a large part of the life of the church, the vibrant aspects of community life. We want to implement more explicitly the great theme of Vatican II: the common priesthood of all the baptized, with the ministerial priesthood at its service, promoting the holiness of the people of God. Laity today – or, I would rather say, the baptized today – are fully capable of being true witnesses to faith in Christ in their daily lives, and therefore in the lives of small Christian communities.

The role of the laity is something the priests' movement also has promoted. Is this possible common ground between you and them?

Yes and no, because I think the accents are different. The emphasis shouldn't be primarily on laity assuming offices in the church, but assuming responsibility for evangelization, for mission. Our headline for the Archdiocese of Vienna is, "mission first." We even said it in English! The question is, do we really believe that we can attract people to Christ today? It's as simple as that.

Some of the parishes you're closing could become centers for laity to lead that mission?

First of all, we're not so much closing parishes as clustering them. For example, five small parishes in the countryside will form one greater parish. Their facilities, however, could be used to animate some of these small Christian communities. Of course, there are also the ecclesial movements, the religious orders, all kinds of prayer groups, and so on. Already, they're what forms the day-to-day life of the church.

Do you see other signs of hope for the New Evangelization?

I would add one more point. What strikes me is the growing number of youth prayer groups throughout

the country. It's like a fire spreading throughout the country. Everywhere, these youth groups are springing up, sometimes related to a parish or a monastery, but very often they're spontaneous. They just meet among themselves. You can see something new is bubbling there ? there's life!

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