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## **What Catholics know about power**

by Nicole Sotelo

Young Voices

Schüller Tipping Point Tour

The story goes that it was a June storm that sparked Ben Franklin to try something new: to toss a kite into the air attached to a key below. If lightning really was electricity, the key would hold a spark. Ben reached out his hand and, indeed, the key held energy -- energy that now powers cities and lights up entire populations.

This summer is no different.

Another man is testing the electricity of an idea. His name is Fr. Helmut Schüller. He has a spark in his eyes and the attention of Catholics in Europe, including the Vatican. As a priest of Austria, he has seen the stark realities of the priest shortage and the desire by Catholics for more equal participation. He knows the church needs to change and has decided to do something about it.

Fr. Helmut helped initiate the Austrian Priests' Initiative, which is organizing priests to resist exclusionary church policies and create churches where power is shared and Catholics participate equally, no matter one's gender, marital status or sexual orientation.

These Austrian priests are not alone. Priests are coming together in places like Ireland, India and Australia to look at critical issues facing the church and to work with local Catholics on solutions. In the United States, the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests will convene next week and, later this summer, Fr. Helmut is making his first U.S. tour, traveling to 15 cities from New York to Los Angeles.

More and more, Catholic officials like Fr. Helmut are recognizing the church needs to engage everyone equally, not only because it is the right thing to do but because the church is suffering without the presence and contribution of those who have traditionally been excluded. To name just a handful of recent

moments:

- A few weeks ago, an archbishop and cardinal in Belgium voiced support for civil unions for gay couples, and a group of sisters and priests in the United States convened to advocate for abuse survivors.
- Last month, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz from Brazil, leader of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, told a meeting of women religious superiors he was not consulted on the mandate against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and finally had the courage to share the story. He proclaimed that authority in the church needed to be "revised."
- In April, the chair of Germany's Bishops' Conference, Archbishop of Freiburg Robert Zollitsch, called for women deacons.
- In June 2011, Cardinal José da Cruz Policarpo of Portugal said there was no fundamental obstacle to women's ordination.

These church officials aren't saying anything that hasn't been said before. What is striking is the increasing incidence of clerics willing to speak for change that would involve creating a church of accountability and shared power. And when one cleric speaks up about these issues, it seems to encourage others to speak out, as well. A good idea is, indeed, electric.

And an idea can actually change the way we live. Scientists now believe Ben Franklin's written description of the kite experiment may have been simply that: a written description, a theory. Ultimately, his idea that pointed toward what he believed not only later proved true, but led to other discoveries that now empower millions through the use of electricity.

Perhaps the same is true with these church officials: They are simply pointing toward what most Catholics already believe, that a church of equals is within our grasp if only we have the courage to live it and create a church where power is shared.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **WomenHealing.com**. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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