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Schüller in Cleveland: The church 'has to become again a church of the people'

by Lori Lesko

Schüller Tipping Point Tour

Cleveland — The only way to restore the church to the people is to revisit the Second Vatican Council and openly discuss with the church hierarchy the polarizing issues of optional celibacy, the ordination of women and welcoming lesbian and gay couples to the sacraments. This was the message Austrian reformist priest Fr. Helmut Schüller delivered to a crowd of 400 on Thursday at the Independence Middle School in Greater Cleveland.

Catholics need to return to the spirit of Vatican II and "become citizens of the church again," Schüller said, urging women to continue speaking out for their rights.

Cleveland is one stop of the 15-city "Catholic Tipping Point" tour, sponsored by 10 progressive Catholic organizations including the Cleveland-based FutureChurch. The organizations support Schüller's calls for inclusive and transparent changes to church governance, including greater lay participation, inclusive ministries and justice for LGBT persons within the church.

Founder of the Austrian Priests' Initiative, Schüller issued a global "Call to Disobedience" in 2011, calling for the admission of women and married people to the priesthood as well as greater lay leadership and transparency in church governance. More than 70 percent of Austria's priests positively received the statement, and similar reform movements have spread to Germany, France, Ireland, England, Switzerland, Australia and the United States and include thousands of priests.

Schüller said the clergy group wants the Vatican to revive the "Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis" project that Pope Paul VI initiated following Vatican II. The project sought to establish a common fundamental code or church constitution similar to a bill of rights for church members. The document was never

promulgated, and Pope John Paul II shelved it in 1981. The group claims 425 of Austria's 3,800 priests have endorsed the "Call to Disobedience."

Schüller's U.S. tour comes in the midst of a steadily worsening priest shortage. A recent study from the National Federation of Priests' Councils found that for every 100 priests who retire, only 30 are available to replace them.

More than a dozen parishes in the Cleveland diocese won appeals from the Vatican to reopen after Archbishop Richard Lennon closed 52 churches because of priest shortages and financial distress.

The same scenario has played out around the world. In Austria, the priest shortage has taken its toll on priests who drive from parish to parish to say Mass, dispense sacraments and go on to the next village. The very essence of a parish -- interaction -- is lost, Schüller said.

"This is very discouraging, especially to young priests," he said. "Priests are burning out.

"We asked the bishop, Is our church a supermarket?" Schüller said. "This does not go with the Eucharist, the sharing of bread. The church leaders have become an agency of sacrament distribution. That is not the way of the Second Vatican Council.

"This has to change," he continued. "It has to become again a church of the people. The church is community. We must not live at the base of the church. ... We should be fighting for justice for those kept in poverty."

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Schüller said he initially was afraid of disobedience to the church. But "how many more victims have come with obedience to the church?"

Why doesn't the Austrian priest simply leave the Catholic church and join another denomination closest to his beliefs?

"This is my church," he said. "We should not give in and go to the Protestant churches."

Protestant churches across the country have rolled out the red carpet for Schüller after Roman Catholic bishops, like Archbishop Charles Chaput in Philadelphia, have forbidden the priest on church property.

A last minute intervention by the Chicago archdiocese forced a venue change for a private meeting with area priests. Instead of a parish rectory, "we met at a Protestant church instead," Schüller said. "I guess you could call that a new form of ecumenicalism." In Cleveland, Schüller met quietly with 12 priests from the diocese at an undisclosed location.*

Schüller told *NCR* that when he visited with U.S. church members, he was taken aback by the state of American parish priests. Many were fearful to speak up lest they lose their assignments, livelihood and status.

"There is a difference from how it is in Europe," he said. "I can feel it."

Mingling in the middle school lobby after Schüller's talk, Evelyn Hunt of Cleveland Heights, an activist for women's ordination and past president of the Women's Ordination Conference, said Schüller "made

some good points. We need a constitution. The church leaders need to respect our rights. We are all citizens of the church."

Hunt was on hand when a woman was ordained into the priesthood along the Danube River in Germany.

"It was beautiful," Hunt said. "Austria and Germany have a very strong movement for ordaining women to the priesthood."

Hunt said she knows it is too late for her, but she said she believes the mission of FutureChurch should continue.

Tom Tomsic, a member of Gesu parish in Cleveland Heights, entered Borromeo Seminary at age 13 for high school and spent the next 12 years in seminary. He took a year off and "decided not to go back" because he saw a larger world and didn't believe in the celibacy law.

The tour was sponsored by 10 organizations working for reform in the Catholic church. They include Call to Action; Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good; CORPUS; DignityUSA; FutureChurch; National Coalition of American Nuns; New Ways Ministry; Voice of the Faithful; Quixote Center; and Women's Ordination Conference.

***Editor's note:** An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Schüller met with Cleveland priests at St. Joseph Academy. The academy did not host a meeting and did not sponsor or endorse the Schüller tour. The earlier story also incorrectly identified St. Joseph Academy as the base for FutureChurch. *NCR* regrets these errors.

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