

Excommunicate in Austria

Michael Sean Winters | May. 23, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

My colleague [Stephanie Yeagle reports](#) [1] on the self-excommunication of Martha and Gert Heizer, leaders of the movement "We are Church" because they repeatedly and publicly held so-called eucharistic celebrations without a priest. Two things jumped out at me from the report. First, the spokesperson for the diocese of Innsbruck made clear that this was not an outcome they desired, saying: "For me it is a defeat that we did not manage to get the couple to change their minds and avoid legal proceedings. Determining self-excommunication is never a victory, but always a defeat for the church." The situation is, indeed, a source of sadness.

The second thing that jumped out at me was this sentence: "The We Are Church international movement was founded in Rome in 1996, according to the organization's website, and it is committed to the renewal of the church on the basis of the Second Vatican Council." I would like to know where, precisely, in the documents of the Second Vatican Council the Heizers found anything that would suggest a eucharistic celebration without a priest was even possible and not an offensive pretension? The "spirit of the Council" has been invoked to justify many things with which I disagree, but not even the spirit of the Council can be stretched this far.

The situation is tragic. But, those who dismiss the authority of an ecumenical council, or invoke their imagination of the council to justify contradicting it, are on the shakiest soil imaginable. What is next? Questioning the decisions of Nicaea? Will We the Church leaders begin embracing, or even tolerating, Arianism? After all, the Arians had consciences too, and the primacy of conscience, and something Newman said about a toast to conscience first, and well, we don't like the priest, and....you get the picture. People who love Pope Francis' simplicity should not deceive themselves. He strikes me as a man who will walk a mile with a fellow soul, but I am betting he does not have a lot of patience with people who think nothing of standing in direct opposition to the Church, or even to himself, whether they be prelates in Rome or deeply confused laity in Austria.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/head-we-are-church-excommunicated-celebrating-mass-without-priest>