

Looking for signs of a 'great awakening' in Austria

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 6, 2007 All Things Catholic

EDITOR'S NOTE: *John Allen will be accompanying Pope Benedict XVI during his Sept. 7-9 trip to Austria. Watch for his daily news stories from the trip at <http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682> [1]*

Pope Benedict XVI grew up in Bavaria, just across the Salzach River from Austria. In his 1997 memoirs *Milestones*, Joseph Ratzinger wistfully describes joining his family for Sunday walks across a local bridge into Salzburg, falling under the spell of Austrian culture and music. Msgr. Georg Ratzinger, the pope's brother, recently confessed that "both of us are Austria-lovers."

Given that history, Benedict XVI's Sept. 7-9 trip to Austria, his first as pope, ought to be a warm homecoming for a pontiff who is virtually a native son. Yet in some ways, enthusiasm here does not exactly seem infectious. In a recent poll asking Austrians to name their most trusted international figure, Benedict XVI actually trailed both the Dali Lama and the Austrian-born governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Another survey found that only 3 percent of Austrians had any interest in seeing the pope live, and 40 percent planned to "completely ignore" his presence.

The ignominy of finishing behind the Terminator in terms of public trust offers one window onto the challenges awaiting Benedict. The church in Austria today may no longer be seething with anger, as it was for much of the last decade, but neither is it the homogenous Catholic culture of the pope's childhood memory.

Official Vatican numbers assert that 72.7 percent of Austrians are Catholic, but the 2005 European Social Survey found that just 63.9 percent of Austrians actually describe themselves that way. Weekly Mass attendance hovers around 10 percent, and financial contributions under Austria's "church tax" system are dropping. Between 1985 and 2002, the number of priests in the country dropped by almost one-quarter. Almost 30 percent of Austrians today say they have no religious affiliation at all.

While no one seriously disputes this decline for the Catholic church, the real question is how it ought to be interpreted. Is it, as some pessimists would have it, a way-station along the path to gradual extinction? Or, is this a painful but necessary winnowing that will eventually allow a stronger Catholicism to emerge -- one reduced in size, perhaps, but with a clearer identity and a deeper and more personal faith?

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, a protégé of the pope and perhaps the closest thing Catholicism has to a crown prince, clearly wants to believe the latter. Schönborn recently told Vatican Radio that despite its struggles, Austrian Catholicism today is witnessing a "great awakening."

As evidence of a revival, church officials say that the number of Austrians abandoning the Catholic church is declining. They point to 2006 data showing that the total number of defections in that year was 36,645, which represents an 18 percent dip from the 44,609 who left in 2005. In Vienna, the number of exits in 2006 was the lowest since 1983. (Under Austrian law, a Catholic who wants to avoid paying the government-collected church tax, which amounts to roughly \$325 a year, has to formally withdraw from the church. Over the last decade, roughly a half-million Austrians have done so.)

Professor Paul Zulehner, Austria's most distinguished sociologist of religion, says that based on a national survey he carried out last month for the state television service, no more than 37 percent of Austrians, Catholics and Protestants combined, can be called "real Christians," meaning people who accept the teachings of Christianity, engage in prayer and worship, and participate actively in a church.

Given Austria's ultra-Catholic history that might seem a depressing result, but Zulehner is inclined to see the glass as half-full.

"We always count down from 100 percent, and if you do that, things look terrible," he said on Thursday. "But I think we should count up from 0 percent, because this isn't the Hapsburg Empire anymore. Nobody has to be a Christian today. From that point of view, the wonder is not why there are so few Christians, but so many."

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By all accounts, Benedict XVI at least will find a calmer atmosphere here than the last time a pope visited Austria, a decade ago.

When John Paul II came in 1998, the church was in open revolt. Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër of Vienna had been forced to resign in 1995, following charges that he had molested novice monks while a Benedictine abbot in the 1970s. Perceptions that the church was slow to respond to those accusations fueled deep discontent, and unleashed a powerful reform movement. On Good Friday 1995, two Catholic schoolteachers in Innsbruck named Martha Heizer and Thomas Plankensteiner went on local TV to demand reform in the church, asking other Austrians to join them.

Within weeks, a national campaign emerged called *Wir Sind Kirche*, or "We Are Church," which collected almost a million signatures of support in Austria, and later over two million in Germany. That wave of energy crested in an unprecedented national assembly of Austrian Catholics in 1997 called the "Dialogue for Austria," where delegates voted to endorse a sweeping reform program, such as local participation in the naming of bishops, an end to mandatory priestly celibacy, and reversing the church's ban on birth control.

Predictably those ideas went nowhere in Rome, but they continued to generate wide ferment here. Austria was gripped by crisis anew in 2004, when more than 40,000 pornographic images were discovered on computers in the seminary of the Sankt Pölten diocese, including sexually compromising photos of seminarians and staff. The truculent bishop of Sankt Pölten, Kurt Krenn, who had been among the most vocal defenders of Groër and a harsh critic of the *Wir Sind Kirche* movement, was eventually forced to step down.

Today things are far more quiet. New bishops in Salzburg and Sankt Pölten have brought a less confrontational tone, and the atmosphere of crisis has largely lifted.

Veteran Austrian journalist and Catholic activist Hubert Feichtlbauer believes that Schönborn deserves some of the credit, saying that he has learned to "take criticism without cracking down on the critics." For example, Feichtlbauer said, Schönborn recently wrote to Pope Benedict to outline reform proposals from a group of Austrian priests led by Fr. Helmut Schüller, a popular figure who once served as Vienna's vicar general.

When Schönborn took over, one of his first moves was to fire the more liberal Schüller -- doing so by leaving a note on Schüller's doorstep. In that context, Feichtlbauer said, Schönborn's willingness to listen now is seen as especially significant.

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This weekend shines a spotlight on Schönborn, a well-regarded intellectual and an increasingly important point of reference for Catholics who believe there's still a future for the faith in Europe.

Few members of the hierarchy enjoy a more distinguished ecclesial pedigree. A member of the ancient Austrian noble family of Schönborn-Buchheim-Wolfstahl, Schönborn is but one of two cardinals and 19 archbishops, bishops, priests, and religious sisters his family has produced. He is not even the first Schönborn to be the primate of the Austrian church; that honor fell to his great-great uncle, Cardinal Franz Graf Schönborn, who led the Austrian episcopacy under the old Austro-Hungarian Empire from his position as the Archbishop of Prague. (He had previously been the Bishop of Budweis -- making this Schönborn ancestor a "Budweiser").

As a young Dominican scholar, Schönborn studied under then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger at the University of Regensburg in Bavaria in the late 1970s. Schönborn then moved on to become a professor of theology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland.

In time, Schönborn was appointed a member of the International Theological Commission, the main advisory body to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. In 1987, Ratzinger named Schönborn the general editor of the new universal Catechism of the Catholic Church. Schönborn became an auxiliary bishop of Vienna in 1991, and took over as archbishop after Gröer's departure in 1995.

Schönborn shares with Benedict XVI an option for what might be called "evangelical Catholicism," meaning a frank acknowledgement that the old days of intact Catholic cultures are over, and that today the emphasis has to be on quality rather than quantity. The aim is to foster a deeply personal faith among a "creative minority" clear about its identity.

Schönborn is an enthusiastic backer of the new movements in the church, such as the Legionaries of Christ, Focolare, and the Neocatechumenate. In 1997, Schönborn authored an article for *L'Osservatore Romano*

defending the new movements against charges that they amount to "sects within the church."

During the conclave of April 2005, Schönborn was in some ways the campaign manager for the effort to elect Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy. Fellow cardinals reported afterwards that Schönborn had argued passionately that it was "God's will" that Ratzinger assume the Throne of Peter. He's also been mentioned as a possible pope himself one day; during the lead-up to the 2005 conclave, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice called Schönborn "the man of the future."

Schönborn's evolving leadership style seems to blend pastoral sensitivity with a willingness to sharply challenge the philosophical premises of Western secularism. In July 2005, for example, he published an op/ed piece in *The New York Times* arguing that evolution, understood as an unguided, random process, is incompatible with the Catholic faith.

Schönborn plays an important role in Catholic intellectual circles. In May 2006, for example, he hosted a gathering of American and European Catholic thinkers in Vienna to discuss the challenge posed by American writer George Weigel in his book *The Cube and the Cathedral*, which expressed a rather dim view about the cultural prospects for contemporary Europe.

In general, Schönborn is more optimistic about the Old Continent, insisting that its vestigial traces of Christian culture still have some legs. These three days with the pope not only give Schönborn a platform to make that argument, but will also introduce him once again to an international Catholic audience -- indirectly, at least, raising the question of whether this "crown prince" could one day ascend to the throne himself.

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When popes travel they always play multiple roles, including head of state and the universal pastor of the Catholic church. Benedict XVI, however, seems to conceive of himself in one other sense when he hits the road -- as a Marian pilgrim, with visits to shrines and sanctuaries of the Madonna usually forming the heart of his itinerary.

This "Marian motif" is especially clear over this three-day visit to Austria, Benedict's seventh trip abroad since becoming pope.

Benedict's first stop in Vienna is the Mariensäule, a column in the Am Hof square dedicated to Mary. It commemorates what local tradition regards as the Virgin's intervention to save Vienna from marauding Swedish armies during the Thirty Years War in the 17th century. At the base of the column are black angels in full battle grab, victorious over a dragon, a lion, a serpent and a basilisk -- representing hunger, war, heresy and the plague.

On Saturday, Benedict will visit Mariazell, one of the most popular Marian destinations in Central Europe, fulfilling a promise he made in 2004 to return for the 850th anniversary of the sanctuary. Some 40,000 other pilgrims are expected to join the pope. Owing to security concerns, Catholics wanting to attend the event had to pre-register and book a spot on a bus.

The sanctuary dates to 1157, when a Benedictine monk from Germany was sent here to offer pastoral care to local Catholics. The monk brought a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary venerated for its alleged miraculous powers, including thousands of healings that locals attribute to the intercession of the Madonna of Mariazell.

The first reports of pilgrimages to this remote mountain location date to the 1300s, when a basilica on the spot was first erected. Its present form took shape in the 17th century according to the design of famed Austrian architect Johann Fischer von Erlach. Today Mariazell attracts roughly one million visitors each year.

On the last day of his visit, the pope will say Mass at the Cathedral of St. Stephen, the imposing gothic church that dominates Vienna's skyline, and which was badly damaged by Allied bombardments in 1945. He will also visit the Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz, an 874-year-old institution whose theological academy was recently declared a papal university in honor of Benedict XVI.

The abbey draws almost 200,000 visitors each year, who come in part to see a 23-centimeter piece of wood that tradition regards as having once formed part of the Cross of Christ.

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While in Vienna, Benedict XVI will also meet with Jewish leaders for the first time since widening permission for celebration of the Latin Mass in use before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which created tensions due to prayers in the Good Friday liturgy for the conversion of the Jews. The pope's early August encounter with controversial Polish Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, who heads a popular radio network in Poland often accused of anti-Semitism, also stirred Jewish protest.

Benedict is scheduled to visit the Holocaust memorial in Vienna and to meet with local Jewish leaders, in what observers see as a bid to strengthen Catholic/Jewish ties. It's an act with deep local resonance, since Cardinal Theodor Innitzer of Vienna supported Austria's union with Nazi Germany in 1938, symbolizing for critics the Catholic church's insufficient resistance to Nazi ideology.

Benedict will visit the Judenplatz, or Jewish Square, in Vienna, where the city's main synagogue is located. Hundreds of Jews died on this spot during violent pogroms in the 15th century. The pope is expected to invoke the memory of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer who was beheaded by the Nazis in 1943 for refusing military service, and whose beatification is set for Oct. 26.

The session with Jewish leaders in Vienna also comes on the heels of Pope Benedict's September 6 meeting with President Shimon Peres of Israel at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo.

In his only major policy address of the trip, Benedict will speak to the diplomatic corps in Vienna, which is home to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. The current Vatican representative to those agencies is an American, Monsignor

Michael Banach of the Worcester, Massachusetts, diocese, who formerly held the desk for Central and Eastern Europe in the Second Section of the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

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Benedict's trip apparently will not be entirely free of fireworks. Under the slogan "No to the Pope Hype! -- Against Sexism, Conservatism, and Homophobia," a small counter-demonstration was set to take place on Friday in Vienna's Karlplatz. The leader of the youth branch of Austria's main center-left party, the Socialists, said his group would join the protest, calling Benedict XVI a "racist character," according to local media reports.

Another protest was promised for Saturday at Mariazell by a small group calling itself "Operation: Keep Benedict at the Vatican." An anonymous letter to various Austrian media outlets said that protestors had obtained tickets to the papal Mass, and would stage a "peaceful but forceful" demonstration against what they called the "papal spectacle," objecting especially to "baroque splendor in light of the hunger and misery of the world."

A gay rights group in Austria is also putting up anti-papal posters for the duration of Benedict's stay. Featuring a silhouette of the pope, the poster's slogan is "Cave Benedictum," a play on the Latin phrase "cave canem," or "beware of the dog."

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To date, Benedict XVI has presided over a distinct "greening" of the Vatican's social concern, injecting a new level of environmental awareness into his public proclamations. This Wednesday, for example, during his General Audience, the pope said that "the protection of water resources and attention to climate change are matters of utmost importance for the entire human family."

In that light, one element of the preparations for his Saturday arrival at Mariazell has raised eyebrows among environmentalists: four large lime trees, planted in 1983 to celebrate the arrival of Pope John Paul II, have been cut down to clear space for a 53-foot-high platform for Benedict's open-air Mass.

Members of Austria's Green Party have complained of hypocrisy, arguing that if the pope were truly concerned about the environment he wouldn't countenance knocking down trees for an event that will last only a couple of hours. Local officials, on the other hand, said that removal of the trees is part of a general overhaul of the main square in Mariazell, and that new trees will eventually be planted to replace those lost.

"If this was my biggest worry," the local mayor told reporters, "I'd be pretty happy."

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