NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

For a year now, Austrian Catholics debate obedience

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | Apr. 30, 2012
Analysis Vienna, Austria

Photo, left: Catholics attend Mass in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, in 2010. (Dreamstime)

VIENNA, AUSTRIA -- Cardinal Christoph Schönborn is an old hand by now at dealing with Austrian church crises. Appointed archbishop of Vienna in 1995 (at the age of 50), after the late Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër had to step down after being accused of sexually abusing a minor, Schönborn has had to cope with constant demands for church reform ever since -- demands that have now become a perennial issue and frequently hit world headlines. And although he makes no secret of the fact that he is a conservative at heart and an adamant advocate of both mandatory priestly celibacy and of Pope Paul VI?s encyclical Humanae Vitae, for example, he has often surprised Austrian Catholics and others by the courageous way he has tackled seemingly insolvable dilemmas. He has, moreover, never hesitated to criticize the Vatican when to his mind it was at fault or shared in the blame for crises in the Austrian church.

In his chrism Mass sermon on April 2, the Monday of Holy Week, he offered his own Jesus-solution on how priests can cope with three of the most problematic situations confronting them in their pastoral work today:

- The large number of people, including many young, conservative Catholics, who cohabit without being married;
- The large number of divorced people who remarry;
- The increasing number of same-sex partnerships.

?We priests usually give up when we are faced with complete incomprehension at what the church teaches about marriage and abstinence, proliferation and indissolubility. ... There is only one way, the way his disciples learned: get to know Jesus himself better, grow into his friendship,? Schönborn told his priests. Priests should learn to walk the tightrope between canon law and true mercy as Jesus practiced it by asking themselves what Jesus would have done in each problematic situation and then following in his footsteps, the cardinal said.

The sermon attracted much attention, especially in Austria, where the demands for church reform by the now 400-strong Austrian Priests? Initiative, founded in 2006, culminated in an ?Appeal to Disobedience? in June last year. In Msgr. Helmut Schüller, the founder of the initiative, Schönborn has met his match. Schönborn?s former vicar general and before that the director of Caritas Austria, Schüller is a well-known charismatic priest and media personality in Austria. And what is more, several of the reforms the initiative calls for, such as giving Communion to remarried divorced Catholics and to Catholics who have been excommunicated for not paying compulsory church tax, are widely practiced despite the fact that they disobey church law.

While making it quite clear that he could not allow an ?appeal to disobedience? to stand -- as ?whosoever renounces the principle of obedience, disrupts church unity? -- Schönborn gave the dissenting priests time to reflect and said he hoped for an ?amicable? solution.

But the initiative continued to stand its ground. ?Disobeying certain valid and strict church rulings and laws has for years been part of our life and work as priests,? Schüller told the press. The priests were fully aware that the word ?disobedience? was inflammatory but ?we do not mean general disobedience for contradiction?s sake, but graduated obedience, which we first owe to God, then to our consciences and, in the final instance, to church law,? he explained. ?We priests at the grass roots in the church have to lead double lives as we have to cope with the problems the official church line forbids and in the long run that is wearing us out.? The word ?disobedience? was not a ?battle cry? but an expression of ?impatience and clear grievances,? Schüller underlined.

For almost a year now the debate on what exactly obedience implies for Catholics has not died down in Austria, with prominent commentators quoting Cardinal John Henry Newman?s toast, ?I shall drink to the pope, if you please, still, to conscience first, and to the pope afterwards,? and pointing out that Blessed Franz Jägerstätter was one of the very few Austrian Catholics to disobey the Austrian bishops when they called on Catholics to vote for the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany and signed their declaration with ?Heil Hitler.? The church has since rehabilitated and beatified Jägerstätter, commentators noted.

In March, the Austrian church once again hit world headlines and Schönborn had to face yet another difficult dilemma when an openly homosexual man was elected to the parish council of Stützenhofen in Lower Austria. Florian Stangl, a 26-year-old disability-care worker who lives in a registered same-sex partnership and who is a committed Catholic, received more votes in the parish council elections than any other candidate. The Vienna archdiocese?s statutes state that parish council members ?must commit themselves to the Church?s doctrine and order.?

In Schönborn?s absence (he was presiding over the bishops? conference?s spring session in Carinthia), his spokesman recalled that active homosexuals were in a state of grave sin. On his return to Vienna, Schönborn met with Stangl and his partner for lunch and promised that a solution would be found that respected ?both the dignity of all those concerned and of church rules,? with the result that Stangl has been allowed to remain on the parish council. The archdiocese would meanwhile look into revising the parish council statutes so that they express church law more clearly in future, Schönborn said.

In an interview on Austrian state television?s ?Palm Sunday Press Hour,? Schönborn explained how he had arrived at his solution to this latest dilemma. ?In all moral questions we must always first consider the individual human being. Jesus always considered the individual human person first and not the law,? he said, adding that he had been impressed by Stangl?s ?deep Christianity? and active commitment to the church. The problem of allowing remarried divorced Catholics to receive the Eucharist is much the same, Schönborn said, and appealed to priests always to consider each individual case.

Conservative Catholic Italian politician Rocco Buttiglione forcefully defended Schönborn?s decision to allow Stangl to remain on the parish council. In an April 6 article in Il Foglio, Buttiglione said the cardinal?s decision was ?an intelligent pastoral view of the church?s position on homosexuals and homosexuality.?

Schönborn welcomed as a sign of encouragement for the Austrian church Pope Benedict XVI?s criticism of the Austrian Priests? Initiative in his homily during the April 5 chrism Mass in St. Peter?s Basilica at the Vatican (**see story** [1]). ?On the one hand, Pope Benedict?s words show how seriously the pope is taking the ongoing altercation regarding the future of the church in Austria and how well-acquainted he is with the situation here. On the other hand, the Pope has put a number of very serious questions to the Priests? Initiative and has pointed to that principal basis of every renewal, namely to look to Jesus Christ, and, like him, to obey the Father.?

The next day, Good Friday, Schönborn publicly called on the Priests? Initiative to take back the word ?disobedience.?

?The word ?disobedience? cannot be left as it stands,? he once again emphasized on prime time Austrian state television. The initiative should ?publicly declare? that it was taking the word back and should do so soon, he said. The pope had made it clear that certain points in the ?Appeal to Disobedience? were not up for debate and had especially recalled that the church was not authorized to ordain women.

The initiative has called for discussion of the possibility of ordaining married men and women.

The Austrian Priests? Initiative has, however, refused to take back the word ?disobedience.? Obedience without examining one?s conscience is dangerous, Schüller told the Austrian daily Die Presse on Holy Saturday. He recalled that the Second Vatican Council had begun with an act of disobedience on the part of those bishops who had refused to sign the documents prepared by the Vatican. ?We would like to answer the questions the pope has put to us in person,? he said, adding he was ?pleasantly surprised? that the pope had spoken of the ?slow pace of institutions? and had not threatened the initiative with sanctions.

The Austrian group is now forging links with like-minded priests around the world, especially in Ireland, Germany and the United States.

On Easter Monday, Fr. Gerhard Swierzek, priest of the parish where Stangl is now serving on the parish council, announced that he was seeking a new parish assignment. ?Living in sin cannot be the norm,? he said. ?I have a priestly conscience and respect divine and canon law.?

Shortly afterward a woman said in a detailed interview with the Austrian daily Kurier that Swierzek had had an affair with her for three years in his former parish of Pressbaum. Eva-Maria Mahrer said Swierzek ?broke the

celibacy rule. To hear him moralize like this and speak of sinners was just too much for me, so I decided to tell my story.?

Events in Stützenhofen refueled the priestly celibacy discussion and further damaged the church?s credibility. They have also strengthened the cause of the Austrian Priests? Initiative.

Is Austria, led by Schönborn, perhaps becoming a testing ground on how to cope with some of the chief dilemmas facing Catholic priests in their pastoral work today?

[Christa Pongratz-Lippitt is an Austrian correspondent for the London-based weekly Catholic magazine The Tablet.]

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