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Austrian parish listens to priest, none receive the host

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | May. 3, 2012
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Austrian Cardinal Christoph Sch?nborn at a news conference in Austria in 2010 (CNS/Reuters)

VIENNA, Austria -- The parish church of Amras, Austria, near Innsbruck in Tyrol, was chock-a-block full for the first-Communion Mass on April 22. Shortly before Communion, the parish priest, Norbertine Fr. Patrick Busskamp, announced that only Catholics who were in a state of grace should come forward to Communion. Catholics who are divorced and remarried and Catholics who do not attend Mass every week were not worthy to receive the Eucharist, he said.

When Communion time came, not a single adult came forward. The entire congregation demonstratively remained seated. Only the children received Communion.

In an interview with Austrian state radio in Tyrol, Busskamp confirmed that his words to the congregation had been accurately reported, but added, "I wouldn't have refused anyone Communion had they come forward."

Abbot Raimund Schreier of the Premonstratensian Monastery of Wilten, to which the parish belongs, said he regretted what had happened.

"It was most unwise of him to act like this at such a ceremony. I have told him that. Behaving like a policeman shows a lack of pastoral sensitivity," Schreier told the press.

The church had to accept reality, he said. It is necessary to keep reminding people of the rules, but that does not mean handling a situation as insensitively as Busskamp had done, he said.

Referring to the high numbers of Catholics who are leaving the church -- more than 87,000 Austrian Catholics have formally left the church in the last two years -- one of the mothers of a child receiving first Communion told the press it was incomprehensible that the few remaining Catholics were being antagonized like this. Another mother warned that the patience of faithful Catholics is nearing its end.

Only two weeks previously, a priest in Imsterberg in the Innsbruck diocese refused a woman Communion because she had only been married in a registry office.

In June last year, the Austrian Priests' Initiative, which claims about 400 members, released a document, "Call to Disobedience," that suggests saying a public prayer at every Mass for church reform; giving Communion to everyone who approaches the altar in good faith, including divorced Catholics who have remarried without an annulment; allowing women to preach at Mass; and supporting the ordination of women and married men.

Also last year, 311 German-speaking theologians from Austria, Germany and Switzerland endorsed the ordination of women and married men and called for an "open dialogue" on the church's "structures of power and communication."

Pope Benedict XVI used his homily [1] during this year's Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, April 5, to criticize dissent from church teachings as an illegitimate pathway toward reform and renewal. Without specifying the country, Benedict said a group of priests from a European nation had issued a call for disobedience of church teaching, specifically regarding the question of women's ordination.

Last June, while making it clear he could not allow an "appeal to disobedience" to stand because it "disrupts church unity," Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna gave the dissenting priests time to reflect. He said he hoped for an "amicable" solution.

After the pope's Holy Thursday homily, Schönborn again urged the Austrian priests to remove the word "disobedience" from their declaration.

In a long interview in the Austrian daily *Der Standard*, the pastor of Vienna's cathedral parish, Fr. Anton Faber, said he believes Schönborn has signaled a paradigm shift [2] in the Austrian church. Talking about the cardinal's allowing a gay man in a registered same-sex marriage to remain on a local parish council, Schönborn was telling his priests to always give priority to the individual human being as Jesus had done.

"I am very proud of the cardinal. That was an exceptional decision. Anything else would have been a disaster. To send away a committed member of the parish council who enjoys the trust of his parish because he lives in a same-sex partnership would have been madness," Faber said. "That was an example of living reality that every sensible priest practices. It is the way in which we priests in the archdiocese of Vienna have been coping with the dilemma of remarried divorced Catholics for more than 10 years now."

The cathedral priest also spoke with high regard for the Austrian Priests' Initiative, though he is not a member. The members are "excellent, convincing and deeply impressive priests who in no way corresponded to the image of rebels," Faber said.

After years of striving for church reform, they have chosen a rhetorical device -- their call to disobedience -- that has caused a stir and attracted the attention of Schönborn and Rome more than had previously been the case, Faber said.

He said it is imperative for the church to address such issues as priestly celibacy; women's position in the church; who should have a say in episcopal nominations; and homosexuality.

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