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

Archdiocese of Vienna to undergo radical parish reform

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | Oct. 8, 2012
Vienna, Austria

The Vienna archdiocese, which is one of the largest in Europe and extends from the Czech frontier down to the southern Alps, will undergo radical parish reforms, reducing its 660 parishes to 150 in the next 10 years.

"This is the most comprehensive reorganization of the Vienna archdiocese since that of Austrian Emperor Joseph II [1765-1790] 200 years ago," Cardinal Christoph Schönborn told journalists at a Sept. 19 media reception in the archbishop's palace in Vienna.

The main reasons for these measures were the increasing shortage of priests and the steady decline in the number of Catholics, especially of those who regularly attended Mass and were involved in their local parishes, the cardinal explained.

"I am fully aware that these reforms denote a far-reaching change of perspective," Schönborn said. "We must take leave of the traditional concept that the church is only present where there is a priest. That is a restricted view that has developed over time but which must now be corrected. Church is community, and leading offices in the church should in principle be carried out collaboratively, even if the parish priest has the final responsibility according to canon law."

The "common priesthood of all the baptized" will take center stage from now on, Schönborn said, meaning that those who have been baptized and confirmed will be responsible for evangelization and pastoral work. The reform is meant to bring about a new form of cooperation between priests and lay Catholics based on their common vocation to Christianity, he said.

The reforms are scheduled to start in January, and if everything goes according to plan, 80 percent of today's parishes would be amalgamated by 2022, Schönborn said. It is not yet possible to predict exactly how many nor which parishes would survive, he said, but several hundreds of the present parishes would certainly find themselves part of one large central parish in 10 years' time, the cardinal explained.

Several priests -- "at least three to five" -- would be active in each of the central parishes and would run the parish jointly with lay parishioners.

"Participatory leadership with clear task allocation" was the aim, Schönborn said. One priest in each of the central parishes would be responsible to the archbishop.

Within these large central parishes, there would be many small affiliated communities run only by lay Catholics who would work voluntarily. The cardinal expressly emphasized that no parishes would be closed, but smaller parishes might be amalgamated with larger ones.

Catholics would have to travel to one of the large central parishes to celebrate the Eucharist, but Services of the Word would be celebrated by the laypeople running the local affiliated communities.

Church activities would be dedicated to evangelization to a far greater extent than they had been up to now, Schönborn said.

"More and more vibrant communities will be able to develop," he said, as there would be less administrative work, costs would be bundled, resources pooled and thus "more time left for evangelization."

"There are still many problems to be solved. We will have to say goodbye to a great deal of what has become dear to us, but the farewell is at the same time a new departure," Schönborn said.

The reforms were criticized by the Catholic reform group Austrian Priests' Initiative, which is in favor of ordaining married men and women to relieve the shortage of priests.

"Reacting to a mass retreat by retreating oneself is not a good solution," Msgr. Helmut Schüller, a founder of the Austrian Priests' Initiative, told the Austrian daily *Die Presse*. "We are withdrawing from our local parish churches instead of strengthening them."

"In large parishes which cover extensive geographical areas, many of our parishioners will feel lost and go astray, said Schüller, Schönborn's former vicar-general. "Many contacts will be lost and much closeness and presence will be lost, too."

As parish priest of a small, flourishing parish in lower Austria, Schüller said he could not imagine his parish being merged into a large central parish because an "immense amount of blood, sweat and tears but also time and energy has been invested in it."

The community of the faithful was a "very precious asset" that was hardly mentioned in the new reform plans, Schüller said.

According to an Oekonsult poll, 86 percent of Austrians see the amalgamation of parishes as "problematic."

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

Source URL (retrieved on *07/10/2014 - 07:12*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/archdiocese-vienna-undergo-radical-parish-reform