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Cardinal Schönborn: It is 'a time of thirst' for the church

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As the cardinals of the Roman Catholic church meet to determine who will be the next pope, they must realize that "it is a time of thirst" for the church, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn said Tuesday.

Schönborn spoke to *NCR* after a memorial service for Hungarian martyr Maria Restituta at a Roman parish that is a shrine to 20th-century martyrs, such as El Salvador Bishop Oscar Romero. Asked what issues the conclave faces, Schönborn replied, "This is the kind of events that shows what is really important."

Schönborn's comments came as the church's cardinals are meeting in general congregations this week in preparation for the conclave.

Some see Schönborn, a 68-year-old member of the Dominican order known for both for his quick response to sexual abuse issues and personnel clashes with his archdiocesan staff, as a possible moderate fall-back candidate should the cardinals find themselves deadlocked.

He studied under then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger in Regensburg, Germany, in the 1970s but is also seen as a gregarious man, able to greet people openly.

At the prayer ceremony Tuesday, he made himself available to faithful who wished to greet him and insisted during the ceremony that an American woman who briefly knew Restituta address the congregation about her experience. He kissed the woman on the cheek when she was finished speaking.

The Nazis martyred Restituta, a Catholic sister and nurse at an Austrian hospital during World War II, when she refused to take down crucifixes from her hospital's walls.

The ceremony to recognize the beatified sister took place at the ornate Roman Basilica of St. Bartholomew on the Island, which was dedicated by Pope John Paul II in 2000 to the martyrs of the 20th and 21st centuries and contains relics of items that belonged to dozens of them, including Romero, the Austrian layman Franz Jägerstätter and the Italian priest Andrea Santoro, killed in Turkey in 2006.

Like many of Rome's churches, St. Bartholomew's is a cardinal parish, meaning it is formally entrusted to the care of one the church's cardinals. Chicago Cardinal Francis George is its cardinal priest.

Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, a former archbishop of Prague who attended the event Tuesday with the city's current archbishop, Cardinal Dominik Duka, said the ceremony gave "symbolic proof of the suffering" of martyrs during World War II.

Asked to compare the event to the cardinals' continued deliberations over the next pope, Vlk said Restituta's witness "confirms the role of the church."

"The church has to be brave enough to evangelize in every situation," said Vlk, who served as Prague's archbishop from 1991 to 2010. Ordained in 1968, the communist state revoked his authorization to work as a priest in 1978. He spent the next decade as a window-cleaner in Prague.

The Community of Sant'Egidio, an intentional Catholic community that claims about 50,000 members, hosted the prayer ceremony.

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