

Schüller in Philadelphia: 'Where has obedience got us?'

Patricia Lefevere | Jul. 22, 2013

Schüller Tipping Point Tour

Philadelphia

At best, the Catholic church has five to six years before the shortage of clergy members plays itself out in unknown ways in Europe and North America. This is the so-called "Catholic Tipping Point" foreseen by Austrian Fr. Helmut Schüller, one of the most vocal advocates for new models of leadership in the church. The remarks came in an extended interview with *NCR* before his Friday evening address at Chestnut Hill College here.

Schüller and approximately 400 Austrian priests -- about 10 percent of the nation's total Catholic clergy -- launched the Austrian Priests' Initiative in 2006 following worry and discussions about who would care for their parishes when there were not enough priests to take over after they retire. In 2011, they issued an "Appeal to Disobedience" in which they pledged, among other things, not to celebrate multiple Sunday Masses. The movement seeks to open the priesthood to each person suited for the office, including women and married men.

Schüller, 60, said the word "disobedience" upsets many people, but he showed no sign of finding a less troublesome word. "Where has obedience got us?" he asked, reviewing his own priesthood of 36 years. "I feel the church often misuses obedience to keep people down."

In an afternoon meeting with 20 priests of the Philadelphia archdiocese at Chestnut Hill College, the Austrian cleric said he found "a lot of sympathy" and "very supportive" comments from local priests. Some, he said, shared experiences similar to his in Vienna and told Schüller how their work had, at times, brought them into conflict with church authorities.

He pointed to growing frustrations among priests who are asked to pastor three or four cluster parishes. "There is the tension of having to do the same thing continually and not having sufficient time to get to know parishioners," he said, adding that he thought the idea of such a ministry impeded men from joining the priesthood. "My hope is that these potential candidates will not leave the church but will become engaged lay leaders."

Schüller said he became a priest to take care of the faithful. "I wanted to visit them, to know where they worked and who their parents are and what's important to them," he said. Such knowledge is virtually impossible in today's Austria and in large parts of Europe and some of the United States because of staff shortages, he said.

"Our priests today are like little bishops," he said. "They drive up, get out of the car, wave, offer Mass, hear confessions, get back in the car, wave, give a blessing and are off to the next parish."

In the evening, Schüller spoke to approximately 350 people at Chestnut Hill, the third leg of his 15-city U.S. tour. The rented hall on the Catholic campus was full, leaving about 100 attendees to occupy whatever space they could find.

Chestnut Hill, run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, may be the only Catholic venue that Schüller's handlers found for his lecture tour. (Most of Schüller's upcoming talks are to be held at Protestant churches.) Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, who had banned the priest from archdiocesan property, and reportedly said it was "regrettable" that the college rented space to the priest's organizers -- the Philadelphia-area chapters of Voice of the Faithful, Women's Ordination Conference, and Call to Action.

In his interview with *NCR*, Schüller recalled a friendly meeting with Chaput when he was bishop of Rapid City, S.D., and Schüller was a tourist to the state. He told his applauding audience that his shutout from Catholic venues in Boston and Philadelphia, both ordered by Capuchin bishops, meant the bishops were "forbidding you to listen to me. What does the bishop think of his people -- that they're not competent to hear me?"

The priest spoke of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the "rediscovery of the dignity of the baptized" and said this teaching was "foundational" to respecting the rights of all the People of God. He also highlighted the tension that has prevailed for half a century among church leaders "who are afraid of the laity, fearing they will bring bad thinking into the church from their secular lifestyles."

Schüller said the word "laity" as used by some church leaders implies "incompetence," as if there is "hierarchy" and "lowerarchy" in the church. Schüller said he sees recognition of the fundamental rights of all Christians not as a means to democratize the church, but rather as "the church fulfilling its own teaching."

He said he does not believe women should be ordained because of a lack of male priests but because "Scripture shows us that men and women are together the image of God in this world. The image of God is incomplete if only represented by one gender."

Recalling his years as director of Caritas Austria, the priest said when he traveled, he saw that women were doing 80 percent of the organizing and work while men often led projects and headed committees.

"Women don't have appropriate positions in society, and yet they are carrying the burden in daily life," he said. "It becomes more and more dangerous for the rights of women all over the world if the church does not recognize their universal equal rights."

Schüller urged his audience to work toward the nomination of local bishops, "maybe even managing to elect them one day."

Some audience members asked Schüller why he had not been censured, pointing to the excommunication of Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois and the silencing and threatened excommunication of Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery in Dublin for favoring women's ordination.

Schüller said, "The Austrian bishops did nothing to censure us because they know we have widespread support among priests and laity" -- more than 70 percent, according to a recent poll.

He also said public opinion and the press played a role in his life and the life of bishops.

"I may not have spoken out in an earlier age," Schüller said. He said bishops want good public relations, so some bishops are less strict with those voicing dissenting opinions. But because the sex abuse crisis has brought reporters to the chancery and parish door, "they know they can't hide things anymore," he said.

"You just wait; you will be censured," predicted Barbara Zeman, a Roman Catholic Womanpriest who drove 14 hours from Chicago to hear Schüller speak Friday. She is one of 50 women priests who will attend a retreat in Philadelphia later this week.

"Why accept censure?" Schüller replied. He urged Catholics to pray and not to be afraid, to cooperate with other reform and renewal groups and to make public all communications, be they from Rome, the diocese or elsewhere.

As an example, Schüller described Flannery's Dublin press conference in January, which Schüller and clerics from across Europe attended. Flannery, a founder of Ireland's Association of Catholic Priests, brought 1,000 signatures of support from his fellow priests -- about 25 percent of Ireland's Catholic clergy -- who disagreed with his ban from publishing and all priestly ministry, a ban the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 2012.

"The [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] doesn't know what to do," Schüller said, adding that Flannery gave to the press all communications between himself and Rome, his superiors and the Irish bishops.

"The old system of silencing someone used to make them disappear," Schüller said. "That's no longer true."

Although the evening at Chestnut Hill began with a disclaimer from Schüller -- "I can only give the answers for which I have the words" -- the priest found the language to respond to a host of questions, even translating in his head some passages of *Lumen Gentium* and other Vatican II documents.

Joseph Butler of Philadelphia rose to say he was too old to wait for change and might be dead when Schüller's "tipping point" is reached. Butler said he left the priesthood six years after ordination because his pastor was resistant to the reforms of Vatican II.

"The institutional church is not going to change; we have to find our own way," Butler told those gathered.

Rather than be discouraged, Charles McMahon of Voice of the Faithful suggested to a handful of listeners after Schüller's question time ended that the procedures for the nomination and election of bishops "best begin immediately."

McMahon, a University of Pennsylvania professor emeritus, said Americans are proud of their heritage. He urged them to look at the reforms that gave the United States its independence and established its representative government, achievements that occurred as a result of the two Continental Congresses held in 1774 and 1775-76.

"As the colonists learned, talking about the problem of taxation without representation and sending petitions to George III was an exercise in futility," McMahon said. He said American Catholics should add an action plan to the efforts of the various reform movements that have already begun to petition Rome for permission to elect their bishops.

The renewal process will require organization and education of the electorate, he said, but the willingness for change already exists. "There is no time to waste."

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]

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