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Schüller: Bishops have 'no influence' on young people's thinking

by Heidi Schlumpf

Schüller Tipping Point Tour

Chicago — For the crowd of more than 500 at the talk in Chicago by the founder of the Austrian Priests' Initiative, Fr. Helmut Schüller probably didn't say anything they hadn't already heard. But the fact that a priest was not afraid to speak publicly and is networking with like-minded priests around the world gave many audience members hope that reform in the church is possible.

"We as priests try to do our best to support the people of the church in their desires for church reform," Schüller said. "Let us bring hope and courage for the long march of change in our church."

In the seventh stop on his 15-city "Catholic Tipping Point" tour, Schüller shared his experiences with the "Call to Disobedience" movement Wednesday at a charter high school in Chicago. The talk was sponsored by several reform organizations, including Call to Action, Women's Ordination Conference, DignityUSA, FutureChurch, Voice of the Faithful and Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"After hearing Father Helmut, I'm encouraged," said Joe Marren of Chicago, who added that he has worked for church reform for decades. "And I'm comforted that someone in the church is supporting us, the 'lost generation.' "

Marren was referring to older, so-called "Vatican II Catholics," who made up the majority of the audience for Schüller's talk. Indeed, one of the more striking moments in the evening was a question from a younger audience member who pointed out the dearth of younger Catholics and Latinos. When an organizer asked those under 50 to stand, fewer than a dozen did.

"My theory is that younger people have lost the patience that we have," Schüller said, pointing out that his

generation is willing to ask politely for meetings with hierarchy then to wait, discuss, and try the whole process over again.

"For young people, [a bishop] has no influence on their thinking, no authority," he said. "They don't have patience. They say, 'We shouldn't wait; we should do it.' "

Still, he hopes the message of the church reform movement spreads and offered practical next steps.

First and foremost, he said, speak out to the hierarchy. "Write letters, tell them who you are and be proud of your competence," he said. "If meeting them, don't spend any time on small talk."

Second, use the media to affect public opinion. Church leaders "are not amused at having bad PR," he said. The Austrian bishops were aware that priests were "practicing disobedience" in their pastoral work -- inviting non-Catholics and divorced/remarried Catholics to Communion, for example. "But they didn't get nervous when we were practicing disobedience; they only got nervous when we spoke [publicly] about it."

Schüller also advised using the term "church citizens" rather than "laypeople."

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" 'Laity' comes from the Greek [for] 'belonging to the people,' but in reality, 'laypeople' sounds like no competence, no authority, no rights," he said. "This term 'church citizens' means we have to behave like citizens and be treated like citizens, with rights and respect."

Third, "there comes a day when we have to say 'money only for accountability,' " Schüller said.

As for the younger generation: "Give space to young people," even when they are not "useful" to the parish, he said.

"A lot of these young people are now gathering with Pope Francis [at World Youth Day in Brazil]," he said. "They enjoy the big community there, but when they come home, they have discussions with their priest about their daily life. It's a very pragmatic approach."

Eric Theisen traveled to Chicago for a wedding but came early to hear Schüller. The 30-year-old is involved in a chapter of Catholics for Justice in the Church in Austin, Texas, and said he struggles with impatience around church reform issues.

"I don't want to have to wait," Theisen said. "But then I see what this happening, which I think is the first step toward change."

Kate Williams, 27, said she was looking for "creative approaches" to church reform that are inclusive and effective. "I think people my age are very interested in action," said Williams, who lives in Evanston. "They get impatient with long, drawn-out dialogue."

Another younger audience member, Laura Singer of Chicago, a board member of the Women's Ordination Conference, has been involved in years of dialogue and church reform work herself.

"After many years of hosting women who have spoken out, it was inspirational to hear a priest within the system speaking out," Singer said. "It gives me hope that there are other male priests working for justice."

I'm excited for them to join the 'church citizens' who have doing this work for decades.

"It also reinforces that we are a global church," she added. "We can forget that there are other countries that share our desire for justice and reform."

Audience members not in the under-50 category also said the event inspired them.

"A lot of my friends have left the church, but I'm not leaving" said Dorothy Andries of Deerfield, a Chicago suburb. "We still have hope."

[Heidi Schlumpf can be found on Facebook and Twitter.]

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