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Schüller: Popular support provides freedom to speak without condemnation

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Schüller Tipping Point Tour

As Fr. Helmut Schüller travels the United States, the question that puzzles many is how he and other leaders of the "Appeal to Disobedience" movement escape condemnation if not excommunication by the bishops of Austria. Schüller, head of the Austrian Priests' Initiative, speaks candidly about the need for a "new image of the priesthood," which would be open to women and married persons. He sees no reason to deny Communion to divorced and remarried persons and members of other Christian churches. And his organization advocates that every parish have a leader (man or woman, married or single) who would preside at the Eucharist in order to avoid the consolidation or closing of churches. Yet Schüller has so far escaped censure (except for the removal of his title as monsignor). He remains an active priest in good standing in his native Vienna diocese.

At a dinner sponsored by Call to Action the evening before his talk Wednesday in Chicago, Schüller provided some answers to the question. To understand Austrian Catholicism, he said, you have to go back to the turmoil of the 16th and 17th centuries, when the Habsburg rulers imposed the Catholic faith on all Austrian citizens, forcing conversions and expelling non-Catholic clergy from the country.

"This experience of repression," he said, "sowed a lack of confidence" in the hierarchy. "Suspicion and criticism" among the laity has remained a characteristic of the Austrian church to this day, he said.

"On the surface there may be peace and sweetness, but beneath, there is an historic burden we carry," Schüller said.

However, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) greatly encouraged Austrian Catholics, and they readily backed the council initiatives under the leadership of Cardinal Franz König, archbishop of Vienna and a powerful force at the council itself. Like the Netherlands under the leadership of Cardinal Bernard Alfrink, Austria moved forward on collegiality and lay leadership. The new age ended abruptly in 1986, when König resigned and was succeeded not by a like-minded prelate but by a staunch conservative, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër.

"The church was turned around," Schüller said. Groër's auxiliary bishop, Kurt Krenn, handled much of the scuttling of Vatican II initiatives [2]. Groër was forced to resign in 1995 because of serious allegations of child abuse. Krenn, who moved on to head the Sankt Pölten diocese, was forced to resign from there in 2004 after one of his seminarians was caught with pornography [3].* An investigation of the seminary turned up some 40,000 pornographic images, including sexually compromising pictures of seminarians and staff. Krenn's initial nonchalant response, coupled with his turbulent past, set off a firestorm.

The current Viennese archbishop, Christoph Schonbörn, has muted much of the heavy-handed repression of his predecessor but is no advocate of reform himself.

"I believe he is following the advice of Gamaliel," Schüller said. Gamaliel, the Pharisee mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, advised Jewish leaders to refrain from harsh measures, saying, "If this movement is merely human, it will collapse of its own accord. But if it should be from God, you cannot stop them."

No bishop in Austria speaks against the Austrian Priests' Initiative in their diocesan papers or from the pulpit. "They don't dare because of the popular support we have," Schüller said. "They're afraid to go against two-thirds of their readers."

There is also a very practical, financial aspect to this hierarchical silence. If bishops were to crack down on this reform movement, Schüller said, many angry and suspicious Catholics would join those who have already declared themselves publicly as "non-confessing" church members, becoming exempt from paying the portion of their income tax that goes to the church. On a large scale, such noncooperation would have disastrous effects on church operations throughout Austria. Schüller said such a meltdown could spread to Germany as well, where relations between hierarchy and laity are also strained.

So Schüller proceeds calmly and comfortably, speaking wherever he is invited on the benefits of disobedience. His immediate goal, he said, is to raise a critical mass of Roman Catholic priests throughout the world to overcome their fears and speak the truth.

[Robert McClory, a longtime contributor to *NCR*, lives in Chicago.]

*An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that Krenn was found in possession of pornography.

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