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Church needs to restore synodal structure, reformist Austrian priest says

Jerry Filteau | Jul. 22, 2013
Schüller Tipping Point Tour
Washington

The Catholic Church needs to restore a synodal structure of governance and end its current form of highly centralized Vatican rule, said Fr. Helmut Schuller, leader of a group of Austrian priests advocating priestly ordination of women and married men and other church reforms, during a July 22 luncheon in Washington.

Washington was the fourth stop in a 15-city national speaking tou [1]r July 16-Aug. 7 in which Schuller has been urging greater transparency and inclusiveness in church governance, stronger lay participation and the opening of priestly ministry to women and to married men.

Schuller, 60, is a pastor in the Vienna Archdiocese and former national director of Caritas Austria, his country?s equivalent of Catholic Relief Services in the U.S.

In 2006 he founded the *Pfarrer-Initiative* (Priests? Initiative), which called attention to the increasing pastoral problems in Austria and many other countries arising from the growing priest shortage and urged major changes in church governance, lay involvement and rules for who can be ordained.

Schuller was ordained in 1977 by Vienna?s Cardinal Franz Konig, one of the most world-renowned and articulate advocates of church reform and renewal at the Second Vatican Council and in the years following the council.

At the luncheon, following a press conference at the National Press Club [2], he told NCR that most of the priests and bishops who went through the council and the first post-conciliar generation had a significantly different vision of church than that which prevails today.

He attributed the shift since then almost totally to Pope John Paul II, and secondarily to Pope Benedict XVI. He said that soon after his 1978 election John Paul started appointing far more conservative priests ? whom Schuller described as more in the mindset of the First Vatican Council than of Vatican II ? as bishops in Austria, Germany and many other countries.

The second generation of priests after Vatican II consisted of men drawn to seminaries and priesthood by John Paul and formed in their perception of church by that pope and the bishops he appointed around the world, he said.

At an earlier meeting in Philadelphia [3], Schuller warned against a Vatican III today because such a council today would be overwhelmingly dominated by a conservative hierarchy appointed by the last two popes.

When he was asked in Washington what reforms in church governance he thought were necessary today, Schuller immediately referred to church history and the central role of synods ? which he said were not quite

democracy, but resembled it in the interplay of various levels of top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top consultation and decision-making.

When a reporter at the table challenged him on the effectiveness for revitalizing or spreading the faith that synodal governments have had in various Orthodox churches, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, Schuller noted that the idea of reintroducing a synodal structure in the Western Church is a matter of principle, not of how successful it might be in practice.

The underlying principle of synodal practice is that it balances input from above and below and respects the baptismal dignity and responsibility of the faithful in the church, he said.

At several points in the luncheon conversation he waxed eloquent on lay rights and responsibilities in the church, suggesting that the Vatican II vision of the laity has yet to be achieved.

He said that when he and other Austrian priests announced the Priests? Initiative in 2006, all the bishops in Austria ?were at the beginning very angry ? not very friendly.? While only 15 percent of the country?s priests are members, he said, a recent survey showed that well over two-thirds of Austria?s priests support its goals.

He also said his organization collaborates regularly with other reform-minded Catholic groups in the country, including *Wir Sind Kirche* (We Are Church), which is organized in several countries.

Several Austrian bishops eventually agreed to meet with priests involved in the initiative, but they declined to endorse their requests, he said

The following year, when Pope Benedict was scheduled to visit Austria to mark the 850th anniversary of its famed pilgrimage site, the Basilica of the Shrine of Our Lady of Mariazell, Schuller said the priests of the initiative submitted a request for a meeting with the pope. They were told the pontiff?s visit to the shrine was a ?pilgrimage,? not an occasion for such discussions, he said.

He told NCR and two other reporters interviewing him at the Washington luncheon that he has limited expectations or hopes from some of the early actions and statements of the new pope.

He acknowledged that Pope Francis? recent instruction to papal nuncios and apostolic delegates around the world to seek out priests who are pastoral, patient and merciful when recommending new candidates for bishops could be a game-changer over the course of many years.

But he questioned how quickly it could affect such appointments, given the current mindset in the Roman Curia and among the world?s current members of the Vatican diplomatic corps.

Schuller was stripped of his title of ?monsignor? after he formed Priests? Initiative, but he said none of the priest members has faced any formal censure or penalty. However, the members of the group are barred from being deans ? leaders of the priests of a geographical group of parishes ? and from holding any diocesan office, he said.

The theme of Schuller?s U.S. tour is ?The Catholic Tipping Point,? based on a projection that within the next six years the priest shortage in Austria will reach a crisis stage where, without significant changes, growing numbers of Catholics will no longer have the regular pastoral care the church ought to provide.

In the U.S. church a similar crisis is looming, as studies show that for every new ordination in recent years, three priests retire or die.

Sponsoring Schuller?s U.S. tour are 10 progressive national Catholic organizations [4].

[Jerry Filteau is former Washington correspondent for *NCR*.]

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