

Austrian bishop uses canon law to excommunicate couple

Robert Blair Kaiser | May. 30, 2014

Viewpoint

We have a pope who has said he is trying "to light a fire in the heart of the world." Now, to my surprise, the bishop of Innsbruck, Austria, seems to be throwing cold water on the entire project.

Bishop Manfred Scheuer has dug up an old piece of canon law to ask Rome to [levy the penalty of excommunication on Martha and Gert Heizer](#) [1] for their occasional ritual remembrance of the Last Supper of Jesus, who bid his disciples to "do this in memory of me." Even more surprising: The Holy Office complied with the bishop's request without bothering to ask the pope, if we can believe [a report from Austria's Kathpress](#) [2] that Pope Francis had never been informed of the Holy Office's decision.

We have historic backing for home liturgies without a priest. None of those disciples at the Last Supper were ordained, nor was ordination an issue for women like St. Paul's Phoebe and Prisca and Priscilla, who presided in their home churches for the earliest Christians. Yet here we see an Austrian bishop mining medieval/Renaissance [Canon 1378](#) [3] for a warrant to condemn the Heizers for, as the canon says, "enacting the liturgical action of the Eucharistic Sacrifice" and thereby incurring "an automatic penalty of interdict." Contemporary Catholics are consulting Mr. Google to find out what that means. In 1077, Pope Gregory VII slapped an interdict on the Holy Roman Empire to bring King Henry IV to his knees in the snow at Canossa. Not since then have too many prelates used the threat of interdict.

Using power words like "interdict" and "excommunication" today may reflect the wish of some bishops to control their people, but what does that say about their duty to serve their people with what they need: to get closer to Jesus?

Some of today's theologians tell us that home liturgies are simply taking the Second Vatican Council's "priesthood of the faithful" to a new level -- not to re-enact the sacrifice of the Mass, but to share Jesus and one another in a communal meal. They believe that when the first followers of Jesus were engaged in a liturgical remembering of the Last Supper, they were not thinking of sacrifice at all, not as defined by the anti-Luther theologians at the Council of Trent. This is what thousands -- maybe millions -- of Catholics are doing now: celebrating home liturgies in Intentional Eucharistic Communities and comunidades de base on every part of the globe. They are having supper together -- a highly significant supper, to be sure, but a supper that is not overloaded with a now highly questioned theology of atonement.

Canonists, of course, can argue that technically, these home liturgy people are violating canon law. But if, according to that law, millions of Catholics are excommunicating themselves, then Rome might think about revising canon law. Or, better, scrapping it entirely. Because it has so little to do with Jesus' witness, it is a sacred cow, best now put out to pasture.

[Robert Blair Kaiser, who has been covering the Vatican since 1962, is the author of [Inside the Jesuits: How Pope Francis Is Changing the Church and the World](#) [4].]

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