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Austrian bishops call for church unity to bust stalemate

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | Oct. 26, 2012
Vienna Austria

In a 15-page pastoral letter, which Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna admitted was the "outcome of intensive dialogue with Rome," the Austrian bishops insist that renewal of faith in full communion with the pope and the church's magisterium, and with special emphasis on church unity, is the only way out of the stalemate between the bishops and the Austrian Priests' Initiative, which demands far-reaching structural church reforms.

The pastoral letter, titled *Jahr des Glaubens* or "Year of Faith," has a special chapter on the ongoing deadlock in the Austrian church since the Austrian Priests' Initiative, which has more than 400 members, published its "Appeal to Disobedience" in June 2011. The initiative, which has the support of a large number of Austrian lay Catholics, calls for radical church reforms, including the ordination of married men and women.

Schönborn, president of the Austrian bishops' conference, presented the pastoral letter at a news conference in Vienna in the first week of October, before he headed to Rome for the 2012 Synod of Bishops, which has the theme "the new evangelization" or reviving Christian faith in increasingly secular societies. The synod coincides with the opening of a special "Year of Faith," which runs from Oct. 11, 2012, to Nov. 24, 2013, which also has focus on "the new evangelization."

In announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI said, "The church is well aware of the problems facing the faith" and recognizes that without a revitalization of faith rooted in a personal encounter with Jesus, "then all other reforms will remain ineffective."

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a "note" Jan. 7 outlining the aims of the special year. Critical to renewing one's faith and being a credible witness is having a firm and correct understanding of church teaching, it said.

According to Schönborn, after intensive talks with Vatican authorities, the Austrian bishops had agreed to use the Year of Faith to state their "position on the controversial issues under discussion in Austria with absolute clarity."

"And that is what we have done at Rome's request -- but also from our own, personal conviction," Schönborn said at the news conference.

The chapter in the bishops' pastoral letter titled "Reform Backlog?" begins:

We do not want to conceal what we are repeatedly being told in private and in public, namely that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the church situation and particularly with "church leadership," that is, with us bishops and with Rome. Behind this dissatisfaction, there is usually deep concern about a way forward for the church and about its future. Pope Benedict XVI showed how well-informed he was about these concerns in his impressive sermon at the chrism Mass on Maundy Thursday [April 5], in which he went into the "Appeal to Disobedience" by a group of priests in Austria. Many people in our country are under the impression that "no progress is being made," that "we're not moving forward" and so the catchphrase "reform backlog" has

established itself. On the other hand, we bishops have been saying quite clearly for more than a year now that an "Appeal to Disobedience" cannot be left uncontradicted. Does this mean that we will now remain in a sort of "no-win situation for everyone involved," in which we continue to goad one another with more and more accusations? We see the Year of Faith as a chance being offered us by the Lord to find a way out of apparent or real deadlocks together.

The bishops go on to say that they share the concerns behind certain demands for reform. "Many Catholics are above all worried about the shortage of priests. In some parts of our country this is being felt more and more acutely. More and more people, whether they belong to the church or not, find it difficult to understand why the conditions for priestly ordination cannot be changed in such an emergency and why 'proven married men' (*viri probati*) cannot be ordained. They think that we bishops should put pressure on Rome to reform the present stipulations. What most people overlook, however, is that the Second Vatican Council decided in favor of retaining mandatory priestly celibacy in the Roman Catholic church and that all the episcopal synods since the council have confirmed this. Should this not be seen as a sign from the Holy Spirit?"

They then add, "We are convinced that God is calling men to the priesthood today. The question is only whether the humus in which such vocations can grow is there and is being nurtured."

Citing the priest shortage and the drastic reduction in regular church attendance, the bishops appeal to Austria's Catholics to become more mobile, amalgamate with neighboring parishes, travel farther to celebrate the Eucharist, and above all renew their faith.

The bishops repeat that they can understand that the faithful are impatient and expect and demand reforms, but point out that some of the changes could only be made at the cost of church unity and that they "as bishops are bound to preserve and promote that unity."

At the press conference, Schönborn emphasized that this statement did not mean that the bishops were no longer in dialogue with the priests who had signed the "Appeal to Disobedience."

"We remain in dialogue but some demands can only be made at the expense of church unity and that cannot be our [the bishops'] aim," he said.

The Austrian bishops did not think that their differences with the Priests' Initiative would lead to a schism, Schönborn said. He suggested that all those involved should take a "step back" (he used the English words) and take a critical look at the deadlock with the aim of finding out what they had in common.

In his archdiocese, Schönborn said, he would continue the policy of not appointing to leadership posts priests who had signed the appeal. One cannot represent the bishop and at the same time support an appeal against the bishop, Schönborn said.

The bishops had chosen not to write a shorter pastoral letter, he said, so that they could go into problems more deeply. The letter was to have been printed in full in all nine diocesan newspapers, which have a readership of approximately 460,000. "My wish would be for as many of the faithful as possible to study [the document] in their parishes, families and in prayer groups during the Year of Faith," Schönborn said.

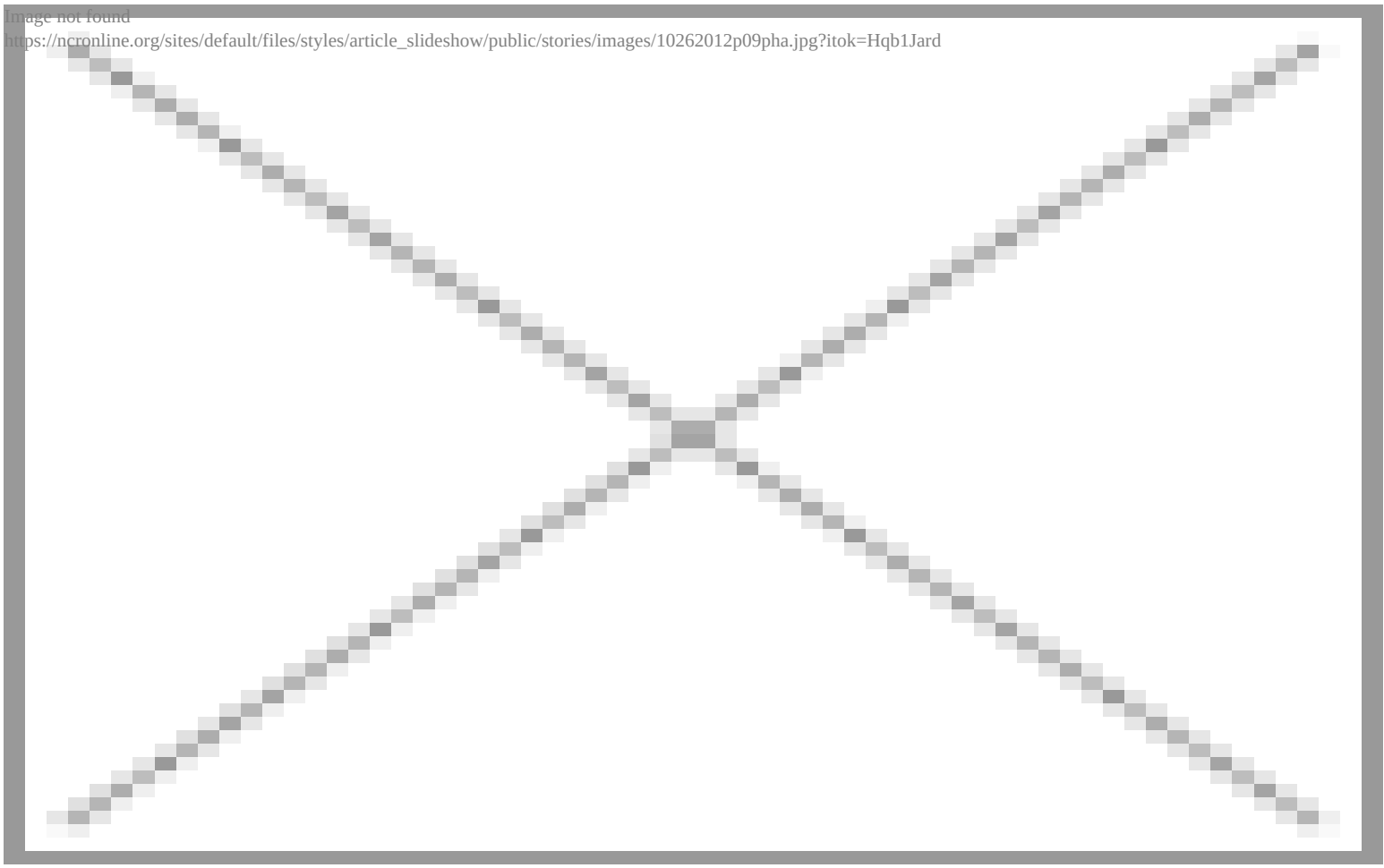
Msgr. Helmut Schüller, head of the Austrian Priests' Initiative and initiator of the "Appeal to Disobedience," said that the letter showed church leaders were playing faith and the wish for reform against one another.

" 'Renewal can only come from faith, and wishes for reform obviously cannot.' That is something I reject," said Schüller, a popular media personality and once Schönborn's vicar general.

While the Priests' Initiative wanted consensus, he said, "consensus must be built on a necessary altercation beforehand, otherwise it is a dead consensus. And if the majority of the people of God are excluded from finding the consensus, then the consensus is not very genuine."

He also said that it was "historically untrue" to say that Vatican II had decided in favor of retaining mandatory priestly celibacy, pointing out that Pope Paul VI had specially requested that the topic not be discussed at the council.

[This article includes some reporting from Catholic News Service.]



Cardinal Christoph Schönborn arrives at a meeting of the cardinals with Pope Benedict XVII at the Vatican in February. (ABACAPRESS.COM/Eric Vandeville)

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