

Guns, gays and God collide in champ's choice of queen

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BERLIN (RNS) It's not the first time the choice of a royal spouse has caused a stir.

But it might be the first such case where gay men, guns and German Catholic groups have played such an intertwining role.

The mini-scandal centers around whether Dirk Winter, a 44-year-old beverage wholesaler who lives near Munster, should be able to compete in a national competition next month among the best marksmen from Germany's various Catholic-affiliated shooting clubs.

The problem is not with Winter's handling of a gun or, church officials insist, with the fact that he is openly gay. The problem is that Winter, after winning the title of "Schutzenkoenig" (king of the shooters) at his local club earlier this year, chose his longtime partner, Oliver Hermsdorf, to be his queen.

Needless to say, the choice raised more than a few eyebrows.

By virtue of being "queen," Hermsdorf would have the right to appear with Winter at a variety of events, including parades. The shooting clubs have a high profile in Catholic parts of Germany, where members are active in social causes. All clubs are very closely linked to the church, with church officials often sitting on their boards.

There is, however, no requirement that members be Catholic, male or heterosexual. It's not even the first time Winter himself has won the local crown, but it appears to be the first time a gay man has picked his male partner as a consort.

The issue might have died down had it been kept local. The Most Rev. Heiner Koch, the Catholic auxiliary bishop of Cologne, ruled that Hermsdorf could appear at local social events with Winter, so long as he walked a few steps ahead of or behind Winter. The two men, he said, should not appear side by side.

But then Winter qualified for the national competition alongside all the Schutzenkoenigs from other German clubs. That would mean Winter and his partner would appear at a variety of social events at a national level.

Now Winter has been threatened with disqualification for not living up to Catholic ideals.

"Before competing he signed a questionnaire stating that he subscribed to Christian values and lived by the motto `Faith, Tradition and Home," Rolf Nieborg, a spokesman for the Association of Historic German Shooting Clubs (BHDS), told the Hamburger Abendblatt newspaper.

By insisting on bringing his male partner with him, the BHDS argues, Winter is disrespecting the Catholic teaching of marriage between a man and woman.

Winter, who never set out to be a crusader for gay rights, told the Berliner Zeitung newspaper that he found the "whole drama silly," and noted that he had originally planned to ask a female friend who, in turn, said he should just ask Hermsdorf instead.

Both sides have agreed to a media blackout, Nieborg said, because the sporting club resents the way German media have portrayed the controversy as anti-gay. For his part, Winter has said he doesn't want to do anything that might get him disqualified.

No decision will come until the bishop returns from vacation. In the meantime, championship organizers have said they assume Winter will participate.

To be sure, Winter has supporters. Gay and lesbian groups have blasted the church as the story made headlines, accusing church leaders

of "showing a classic case of being holier-than-thou and denying reality."

Winter reportedly also has the support of his local shooting club; the group's website still reports on his win and coronation at last year's contest. Next to the article is a photo of Winter and Hermsdorf standing together, along with the rest of the royal court.

"Afterward, there was a harmonious marksman's ball, complete with a large raffle, where people partied into the wee hours," it reads.