

Austria's dissident Catholics urged to "maintain church unity"

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November 17 (ENInews)--Austria's Roman Catholic bishops have rejected a call by dissident church members for laypeople to begin presiding at Mass when parishes have no priests, but the bishops also pledged to maintain a dialogue over possible changes in church life.

In their 10 November declaration, the bishops rejected a 5 November call by Austria's We Are Church movement for laypeople to preside at Mass and celebrate the Eucharist. The bishops were also reacting to a July "Call to Disobedience" signed by 250 of Austria's 4,200 Roman Catholic priests, urging the ordination of women priests and distribution of Communion to non-Catholics and remarried divorcees.

The bishops said Austria's dioceses were "taking opportunities to innovate" in response to "real and serious problems," and were confident they would "find answers to the questions asked today." However they added that the summons to disobedience had "triggered alarm and sadness," and "left many Catholics shaking their heads."

"Some demands allied with this call for disobedience are simply unsustainable -- the call for a Eucharist without the Blessed Sacrament openly breaches the central truth of our Catholic faith," the bishops' conference said.

Josef Pumberger, news editor of a Vienna-based Catholic news service and a prominent lay expert, said some reforms are necessary and laypeople need to be involved. But the bishops are drawing a line, he said in an interview with ENInews on 17 November. "Certain things are against Catholic theology and church law and won be accepted by the church here -- such as celebration of the Eucharist by laity," he said.

The bishops also urged dissident priests and lay Catholics to "show goodwill and a sense of compromise" and avoid demands which "contradict the church's identity and put its unity seriously at risk."

Hans Peter Hurka, We Are Church's chairman, told ENInews that Austria's bishops had pledged to hold a dialogue with Catholic clergy, but had rejected calls for a discussion of New Testament guidelines.

He added that 505,000 Austrians had signed the movement's founding petition in 1995, adding that recent opinion surveys suggested 80 percent now backed its demands.

"All of this is seen as irrelevant by the bishops -- they don't seem to realize the train has already left and they're still standing on the platform," the lay Catholic said. "The situation is now beyond church control and the dangers of a schism are very real."

Formed in 1995, We Are Church is linked to similar groups in other countries, including Germany, Ireland and the United States, and calls on its website for a "fraternal church" and "full equality of women," as well as a "free choice of celibate or non-celibate lifestyle" and "positive evaluation of sexuality." Four-fifths of Austria's 8.1 million inhabitants identify as Roman Catholic.