

Pope Benedict XVI says church reform won't come through open dissent

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c. 2012 Religion News Service VATICAN CITY (RNS) In a rare public rebuke, Pope Benedict XVI on Thursday (April 5) denounced a call for optional celibacy and women's ordination that was issued by a group of Austrian priests, saying true reform will not come as a result of open dissent.

The Austrian group launched an "Appeal to Disobedience" last year, asking for an end of compulsory celibacy for priests, the ordination of women and allowing divorced people to receive Communion. The group says it has the support of 400 priests, or around 10 percent of Austria's clergy, and similar initiatives have taken root in other European countries, including France, Ireland and Germany.

In his Holy Thursday homily in St. Peter's Basilica, the pope took the unusual step of directly responding to the critics.

"We would like to believe that the authors of this summons are motivated by concern for the church, that they are convinced that the slow pace of institutions has to be overcome by drastic measures, in order to open up new paths and to bring the church up to date," he said. "But is disobedience really a way to do this?"

The pope, who as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger headed the Vatican's doctrinal enforcement office for 25 years, questioned whether "disobedience" can be a "path of renewal for the church," and reaffirmed "irrevocably that the church has received no authority" to ordain women priests. But he stopped short of explicitly condemning the group's other requests.

He cautioned that "true renewal" comes only through the "joy of faith" and the "radicalism of obedience," not through "human caprice."

Hans Bendorp, a member of the steering committee of the priests' initiative, said the pope did not condemn the group, but asked "a lot of questions, which we should take to heart."