

Austrian cardinal continues dialogue with priests calling for reforms

ROME - Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna is not playing "a game of chicken" with priests calling for reforms in church practice, but is interested in getting the priests to work with him to bring new life to Viennese parishes, his spokesman said.

"The situation is not as dramatic as the Austrian media make it seem," said Michael Pruller, archdiocesan spokesman.

"There has been no discussion of sanctions, no ultimatum, no talk of punishment," the spokesman told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Sept. 6.

The leaders of the "Initiative of Parish Priests" launched a "Call to Disobedience" in late June, urging priests to join them in saying a public prayer at every Mass for church reform; giving Communion to everyone who approaches the altar in good faith, including divorced Catholics who have remarried without an annulment; allowing women to preach at Mass; and supporting the ordination of women and married men.

Cardinal Schonborn met Aug. 10 with the four Vienna archdiocesan priests who are on the presiding council of the initiative, and he plans to meet with them again in a few weeks, but no date has been set, Pruller said.

"We don't send spies to all the parishes to make sure all the rules are kept," he said, but he added that, if a priest is violating church law, the situation will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

According to news reports, the initiative's membership has grown from about 300 priests to about 400, and polls taken among Austrian Catholics showed overwhelming support for the changes the priests support.

"The polls are in line with polls from previous years," Pruller said. "It is a reminder

that we have to do more to explain” the church’s teaching on ordination, the sacraments, marriage and church structure.

In late June, in a written response to the priests’ “Call to Disobedience,” Cardinal Schonborn said he was shocked by the idea of urging priests to disobey church discipline, but he wanted to discuss with members of the initiative ways to meet the needs of Viennese Catholics. He also said that if the priests really believe they have a profound conflict of conscience in following church teaching, they may have to consider whether or not they want to continue as Catholic priests.

Many people read the cardinal’s statement as an ultimatum.

But “this is nothing like that,” Pruller said. “There will be an ongoing debate and there has to be an ongoing discussion of the underlying issues.”

Meanwhile, the president of the Austrian conference of superiors of men’s religious orders has called for a “church summit” to involve all Austrian church leaders – not just Cardinal Schonborn – in discussing ways to respond to the priests’ initiative and consider possible reforms.

Pruller said Cardinal Schonborn met only with the priests in his archdiocese who were leaders of the initiative and that a wider discussion would be up to the bishops’ conference, which meets in October.

For several years, he said, the cardinal and archdiocesan leaders have been promoting a reorganization and renewal of the church life in Vienna.

The cardinal’s intent in meeting with members of the initiative “is more a game of convincing and winning them over, and not a game of chicken,” Pruller said.

The cardinal is convinced that his plan for renewal and reform, aimed at helping each Catholic discover his or her mission as a member of the church, is “more likely to solve the problems in the long term,” the spokesman said.

“People are leaving institutional religions – even the Protestant churches that have married ministers and women,” he said. “We have to deal with it – not by asking what the church can do for me and do I have a right to have a Mass within walking

distance of my home.”

Too many Catholics have been satisfied with “a cozy parish” where they can attend Mass, but they do not seem to realize that no one new is entering the doors, he said.

In the Vienna Archdiocese, he said, many priests are pastor of three or four parishes at a time. They work with three or four parish councils, three or four sacramental preparation groups, three or four finance councils “and have no time for pastoral work.”

“People need to recognize that everybody is called to pastor others, to serve,” he said. “It’s not that we are sheep and here just to say, ‘baa, baa,’ but we must be shepherds for one another, reaching out” and bringing people into the church’s life.

“Changing the rules for priesthood won’t change this,” he said. “We have to address the real needs of people in the 21st century” and that probably will mean larger parishes where people are encouraged to form small groups, “which are more vibrant and better at supporting each other in the faith” and at reaching out to others.