

Leading Dissident Priest Slams Covert Pope Selection Process

A leading dissident Austrian priest whose call to disobey some Roman Catholic teachings drew a rebuke from **Pope Benedict** last year urged church leaders to throw off their secrecy and canvas churchgoers on who should lead them next.

Rev. **Helmut Schueller**, head of a group of priests who openly challenge church positions on taboo topics such as priestly celibacy and ordaining women, said selecting a successor to Benedict was a chance to embrace public **debate**.

Schueller says his group represents 10 percent of Austria's clergy and enjoys broad public support for its pledge to break church rules by giving communion to Protestants and divorced Catholics who remarry.

"If things were going well, the **conclave** fathers would at least be going out to the church grassroots and calling meetings to really hear what the faithful expect," he told Reuters in a phone interview on Wednesday.

"I find inappropriate this whole method that the cardinals withdraw into their own circle and something leaks out now and then about who might be under consideration," said Schueller, whose group is getting increasing attention abroad. "Most of the faithful know hardly anything about these people."

Some 117 cardinals will enter a closed-door conclave at the Vatican in mid-March to elect a successor to Benedict, who stunned the world's 1.2 billion Catholics on Monday by saying that he would step down on Feb 28.

There are no open campaigns or declared candidates for the post and cardinals are forbidden by church law from revealing who they voted for. Many cardinals choose their favorite after

a series of discreet contacts in the days before the election.

Coded Language

One front-runner is Cardinal **Christoph Schoenborn**, whose deputy Schueller once was in the Vienna archdiocese. His decision to debate with rather than discipline his dissident priests may count against Schoenborn among hard-line cardinals.

Schueller said such an important decision required all the time and effort needed to form a broad **consensus** rather than letting a small group of top leaders decide this in secret.

"A billion Catholics are listening to what is (being discussed) in entirely **secretive**, coded language," he complained, calling it undignified that the laity hear about the process only from journalists reporting from the Vatican.

"This passive waiting around is repugnant. It's really time, and commensurate with the dignity of the faithful, that (the cardinals) put their cards on the table," he said.

Reformist Austrian Catholics have for decades challenged the conservative policies of Benedict and his predecessor Pope John Paul, creating protest movements and advocating changes that the Vatican firmly rejects.

Benedict, who for over two decades before his 2005 election was the Vatican's chief doctrinal enforcer, singled out the Austrian rebels for criticism last April while restating the church's ban on women priests.

The German-born pontiff said he would not put up with open revolt from clerics and lay people.

Vatican Rules Unchecked

Schueller said an outsider from Africa or Latin America would have his work cut out for him to take on **Vatican** insiders.

Two-thirds of today's Catholics live in Latin America, Africa and Asia and Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana and Cardinal

Odilo Scherer of Brazil are among those mentioned as candidates.

“The biggest problem is that the Vatican establishment rules unchecked over the global church. Any **pope** who takes this on has to be well to act strategically and has to get lots of cooperation from the bishops of the world,” he said.

But even support from a broad basis might not be enough for a new pope to put his stamp on the church, he said.

“What good are (such) authorisations for the pope if the system quickly takes him prisoner? This is coming out more and more in the analyses and may have been a significant factor of the resignation” of Benedict, he said.

Reporting by Michael Shields, editing by Tom Heneghan and Jon Boyle.

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.