

Reformist Priest Wants Pope to Offer Gays Justice, Not Just Mercy

An Austrian priest who has stirred controversy in Europe with his challenge to Catholic church teachings on taboo topics suggested on Wednesday that women should be allowed to become priests and said that gays need justice, not just mercy.

Father Helmut Schuller, who has been banned by American bishops from speaking in Catholic churches while on a tour of the United States that began in mid-July, welcomed recent remarks by Pope Francis on gay rights, but said discussion could go further.

Schuller, in a telephone interview, said the pope's words were a "good opener" and gay people seem to be happy there's a friendlier tone from the church than in the past.

Schuller, leader of an Austrian priest group known for its "Call to Disobedience" challenging church teachings on taboo topics such as the ordination of women and priests marrying, has been drawing enthusiastic crowds during a 15-city U.S. tour that began in New York in mid-July and starts its West Coast leg on Wednesday.

The pope raised hopes of a softening of Catholic church opposition to **gay rights** when he spoke to reporters during his return from a visit to Brazil this week. Addressing the issue of gay clergy, Francis said, "Who am I to judge?" He also reaffirmed church teaching that homosexual acts are a sin.

Responding to the pope's remarks, Schuller said, "I think it's not only a question of mercy, but it also should be a question of justice to respect the gay people."

On the issue of ordaining women, Francis had reaffirmed the church's ban on women priests, saying, "That door is closed."

But Schuller said the question is, "Who closed the door?" adding, "It is not possible to think the discussion should be finished.

"We should not only knock at the door but try to open it again," Schuller said.

The Catholic church teaches that it cannot ordain women because **Jesus** willingly chose only men as his apostles. Advocates for women priests say he was only acting according to the customs of his times. Seventy percent of U.S. Catholics believe women should be allowed to be priests, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll earlier this year.

U.S. bishops, including Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley and Detroit Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron, have forbidden Schuller to speak on church property.

"Those who are not in harmony with Catholic church teachings in what they speak about should not be given a venue," said Joe Kohn, spokesman for the Detroit archdiocese.

Schuller has been meeting privately with U.S. priests. Some priests and nuns were among the crowd of about 500 people who attended his public speech in Chicago last Wednesday.

Schuller said the "Call to Disobedience" arose out of a sense of "deep sorrow" among some Austrian priests, who feared that the worsening priest shortage would mean the end of parish communities. They feared a future of one priest serving as many as 20 parishes, offering Mass at one village before driving onto the next, unable to serve as a pastor to the people.

"We thought to speak out that this cannot be the future of the church," Schuller said.

Last year, Austria's church told the priests they could not support the manifesto, which had been criticized by former Pope Benedict XVI, and stay in administrative posts. The group, however, has won broad public backing in opinion polls for its pledge to break church rules by giving communion to Protestants and divorced Catholics who remarry.

Schuller said it is important for parish priests, many of whom are already quietly defying church doctrine by giving communion to divorced and remarried Catholics, to come out of the shadows.

"Don't hide yourself in your parish communities," Schuller said in his speech in Chicago. He said bishops know priests are defying doctrine at their parishes, but are comfortable about it because no one speaks out, so there seems to be no need for reform. "They got nervous when we spoke out."

Schuller, who is from the Archdiocese of Vienna, the home of Sigmund Freud, said church leaders' approach to dialogue is like "the man who goes to a psychoanalyst and says, 'We can talk about everything, but not about my mother.'"

Dorothy Petraitis, 82, of Evanston, Illinois, who favors both married and women priests, told Schuller at his Chicago appearance that she is tired of waiting for the church to stop being a "dysfunctional family."

"I want to be a member of a functioning church. That might mean I have to leave the church," Petraitis said. "I don't want to do that. Frankly, I'm a little pissed."

"Please don't leave the church," said Schuller, who noted that he and his fellow rebel priests are often asked by conservatives why they don't leave.

"We say the church is not a corporation for me. It's not an apartment I have rented," Schuller said. "We are church. It's my church, and I want her to become changed."

