

When a pope is not a pontiff

By Thomas C. Fox,
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Austria

You cannot help but feel sorry for Austria's Catholics. Their local church has been plagued by a number of incompetent bishops. They call themselves conservatives, but betray Christian traditions for the sake of ecclesial power.

In the name of what they call orthodoxy they betray core Christian values of human dignity, compassion and service. Far from being shepherds, they have engaged in actions viewed as criminal by the faithful and wider community

Austria's Catholics -- those who have not altogether given up on the church in disgust -- are outraged. Yet they remain largely impotent to effect change and rescue their church.

The most recent outrage focuses on Bishop Kurt Krenn of Sankt Pölten, a man who is emblematic of failed leadership. It was in Krenn's seminary two weeks ago that some 40,000 images of child pornography were uncovered in computer files. Among the pictures were some of seminarians and priests in sexually explicit poses. They revealed a stunning misuse of authority and criminal abuse of minors. (The story is in NCR's July 30 issue, which will be available on the Web site, July 28.)

Krenn, however, dismissed the public outcry that followed the disclosure, saying the pictures represent nothing more than a "schoolboy prank."

Krenn has been dismissive before. When a group of reform-minded Austrian Catholics, Dialogue for Austria, called for some say in the selection of bishops, Krenn said the effort was a "revolt against God." (See NCR coverage in 1998 and 1999, especially: A dramatic step toward reform, We bishops must hear the people and Hope for reform collides with church intransigence.)

It seems Krenn and his likes mistake themselves for the Creator.

Krenn's record of pastoral ineptitude has been long evident. Widespread lay efforts to remove him, many centered in his own diocese, have gone nowhere. It is said that his close ties with Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, the secretary of Pope John Paul II, is one big reason.

Catholics in Austria once were on good terms with their bishops. The seeds of today's widespread lay-episcopal disconnect date back to the 1960s. That's when the Austrian bishops struck a dissenting note on "Humanae Vitae," Paul VI's encyclical reaffirming the church ban on birth control.

Through the 1970s, Austria's episcopacy -- under the leadership of Cardinal Franz König of Vienna, one of the leaders of the progressives at Vatican II -- carved out a reputation for understanding, dialogue and moderation.

After John Paul became pope, he began to name a series of ecclesially focused -- and pastorally inept -- bishops in an attempt to rein in the Austrians. The appointees included Klaus Küng, the head of Opus Dei in Austria, to the diocese of Feldkirch, and Georg Eder to Salzburg. Eder once wrote that AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuals.

Krenn was first appointed auxiliary bishop of Vienna with special responsibility for the "artistic, literary and scientific" worlds. He admitted on television at the time that he could not name one living Austrian artist, painter, poet, sculptor, novelist, musician or scientist.

The new orthodoxy, apparently, requires modest intelligence.

Krenn was eventually named to head the diocese of Sankt Pölten where he quickly termed renewal-minded Catholics as anti-Christians and compared one lay reform group's 1995 petition for change to the 1938 plebiscite welcoming Hitler to Austria.

Then there was a horrific tale of conservative, Hans Hermann Groër, named archbishop of Vienna in 1986. He was in semiretirement at the time, tending to a Marian shrine, always an endearing mission to Pope John Paul. Groër's lone qualification for the highly visible post seemed to have been a close friendship with the pope.

Groër was an enormously unpopular archbishop. His reign -- for that's how he viewed it -- finally hit a wall in 1995 when a 37-year-old man claimed that Groër had sexually abused him as a high school student. Eventually 13 young men lodged charges against Groër and he was forced to resign.

John Paul remarked at the time that Christ also had faced "unjust accusations" and allowed him to become prior of an Austrian monastery.

The unsettling story of the church in Austria, with its cavernous divisions and dispirited laity, represents a monumental failure in Pope John Paul's quarter century as pope. At the core of this story rests papal judgement that disregards the sentiments of the local church in the appointment of bishops.

Pope John Paul has appointed rigidly conservative bishops to the most important episcopal sees around the world. There are exceptions, but not many.

Earlier popes, including Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI mixed conservatives, moderates and progressives in their major appointments. They figured each had something to bring to the Catholic family. John Paul has taken another approach. He has chosen sides, appointing one ecclesial conservative after another.

His approach has buried more pastoral minded bishops in less significant dioceses and has kept countless pastorally inclined priests from becoming bishops.

The result has been to weaken the church, not strengthen it. The inability of the Catholic episcopal leadership during the past two decades to face and respond to the clergy sexual abuse debacle is the most visible example.

It is in this context, we read the news coming out of Austria today.

The word "pontiff" comes from the Latin root, "bridge." We expect a pontiff to be a bridge builder among Catholics. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The vital work of bridge building awaits our next pope.

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