

SARAH MAC DONALD

# Rebels with a cause

A group of Austrian priests who are pressing for liberalising reforms are forging links with like-minded clerics around the world. Last week their spokesman met up with a priests' group in Dublin and explained why there is no going back on their demands

**W**ith his relaxed air and disarming smile, Mgr Helmut Schüller could be the senior partner of an architectural practice rather than a hard-pressed priest calling for disobedience against Rome. Dressed in a grey suit with an open-neck black shirt, the public face of the Austrian Priests' Initiative breezed into the annual general meeting of the Association of Catholic Priests in Dublin and joked at how members have been portrayed in some quarters.

"We are not revolutionaries," he told the gathering. "Revolution must be in a very bad way when people like me are considered revolutionaries!" The Austrian Priests' Initiative, a 400-strong group of priests and deacons, issued its "Call to Disobedience" last June and overnight catapulted the movement on to the global stage. They have continued to stand by their call for reforms including an end to mandatory clerical celibacy, discussion of women's ordination, Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics and a greater role for the laity in the Church.

So far there have been no sanctions against PI members, although Bishop Egon Kapellari of Graz-Seckau described the initiative as a deep wound on the integrity and unity of the Church. Despite dire predictions of schism, Mgr Schüller noted sardonically to his Irish counterparts that "the Church hasn't fallen apart". The former Viennese vicar general also highlighted that "all these 'bad revolutionaries' are continuing to carry out their pastoral duties in their parish communities."

Schüller looks much younger than his 58 years and is one of Austria's best-known priests serving for a time as president of Caritas Austria. Now he works as a parish priest in Probstdorf, a community of four small villages with 2,500 inhabitants a few miles east of Vienna. He combines this with his role as a university chaplain in Vienna.

According to its manifesto, the Initiative was motivated by "Roman refusal to take up long-needed reforms and the inaction of the bishops". Mgr Schüller lists the future of parish communities as top of their reform agenda and the need to dispel the Church's fears that the laity is "infected with secularisation and relativism". He is also concerned about "the unity of the Christian Churches" and on the issue of women priests says: "I think it is a very deep mistake in the structure of the

Church not to have equal rights for men and women in the Church. The arguments against female priests are only the traditional arguments and that's not enough."

The context in which the PI emerged in April 2006 was an increasingly vocal and disillusioned laity in a Church rocked by a litany of sex scandals. As Mgr Schüller explained: "Our impression was that the lay people had done enough in Austria. They had a lot of movements and platforms and they wanted to be heard by the hierarchy but weren't getting any results."

Asked what sparked their June 2011 appeal, he said: "Our patience ran out. We got tired of useless dialogue." He has a sense of foreboding over the direction the institutional



**Mgr Helmut Schüller: 'We have a culture of fear [in the Church]'**

Church is taking, saying: "Time is running out because the Vatican is going backwards. Up to five years ago we thought nothing is moving forward but now we fear that things are moving backwards. It's a question of speaking out very clearly because this may be the last chance for a long time to influence the course of the Church for the future."

There must be a sense of déjà vu for Mgr Schüller in his rather fractious relations with Cardinal Schönborn, who on 10 August urged the Austrian priests to back away from their appeal or leave the Church. A "profound disagreement" in 1999 led to the termination of his role as Cardinal Schönborn's vicar general. Fast forward to 2011 and "Cardinal Schönborn asked us if we could any longer be members of the Catholic Church with this thinking".

The cardinal's meeting with PI delegates, which was scheduled for 10 September, never happened, though Mgr Schüller seemed con-

fident it will take place before the end of this month, or at the latest in November. He believes the cardinal "is fearful that our initiative will divide the Church" – a worry he dismisses. Cardinal Schönborn has also underlined that his meeting with four members of the Initiative's 11-member board is with those who are priests of the Archdiocese of Vienna and he is not speaking to them on behalf of the other bishops or as president of Austria's bishops' conference.

With Initiative members in all nine Austrian dioceses, the cardinal cannot make any unilateral decision but must involve his fellow bishops. "I think he wants the bishops' conference to meet us because he doesn't want to be alone in this problem," said Mgr Schüller, adding that what the bishops' conference decides will be crucial.

Of his time as vicar general under Cardinal Schönborn he recalled: "I entered my office as vicar general with hope for change in the Church. I am a pupil of Cardinal Franz König. He was our bishop when I was a child, he was the bishop when I was a student and he was my bishop when I became a priest."

Mgr Schüller was born on Christmas Eve 1952 and attended the minor seminary in Hollabrunn from 1963 to 1971 before going on to study theology at the universities of Vienna and Freiburg. Ordained in 1977, he credits Cardinal König with operating a "very open atmosphere" in the Viennese archdiocese, saying: "He was not a man of great discussion but he was a man of the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and we walked with him. But now we have the suspicion that the Vatican sees the Church as a fortress against the secular world and that is not the way that the Second Vatican Council started."

Mgr Schüller seemed doubtful that the hierarchy has the appetite to sanction the group because of the support they have among clergy and laity alike. Recent research indicates that they have the backing of 75-80 per cent of Austrian priests and a similar level of support among the laity.

"The bishops know that taking action against us would create a very difficult situation for the Church. I think they are looking for a way to handle the situation but they don't know exactly how to do it," said Mgr Schüller. He welcomes the links between his group and the ACP in Ireland and the United States, seeing it as the emergence of "a network of associa-

tions". The international dimension dispels claims that the Initiative represents "only some Austrian priests ... who are a little bit crazy".

Efforts to engage with the Vatican have yielded little so far. A request to meet Pope Benedict during his visit to Austria in 2007 was rebuffed. Members then wrote to the Pope outlining their position. They received a response from Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone some months later, said Mgr Schüller: "We were told that the questions were interesting but not relevant for the future of the Church."

A subsequent meeting between Mgr Schüller and the then apostolic nuncio to Austria, Maronite Archbishop Edmond Farhat, involved a discussion on mandatory celibacy for Roman Catholic priests. The nuncio conveyed incomprehension at it and urged Mgr Schüller to approach Rome. The first scheduled meeting with Archbishop Luis Ladaria Ferrer, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and a Spanish Jesuit, was cancelled an hour after the Austrian priests arrived in Rome.

Exasperated, Mgr Schüller rang Cardinal Schönborn and asked him to help: "Laughing, I told him we would sit down in St Peter's Square and tell the visiting pilgrims that we were parish priests from Austria for whom the Vatican had no time - though it had made time for sportsmen, actors and ex-presidential statesmen."

According to Mgr Schüller, it became "clear that the Secretary of State had forbidden any office in the Vatican to speak to us", but the intervention of Cardinal Schönborn finally secured a meeting with Archbishop Ladaria at the CDF. Cardinal Schönborn told Mgr Schüller the matter had gone to the Pope "and the Pope had decided that the Congregation of Faith should speak to us".

**O**f their two-hour encounter, Mgr Schüller recalled that Archbishop Ladaria was attentive and polite but that an intervention by the archbishop's assistant, a young Austrian member of a traditionalist movement, changed the course of the meeting. He explained: "We had asked Archbishop Ladaria to tell us if there was something against the principal truths of faith in our programme and Ladaria said, 'No, these are interesting questions - we have to handle them. Tell your bishops they should discuss it with you.' [But] this young priest stopped him and told us that our programme was against the teachings of the Church."

The outcome of the meeting undoubtedly contributed to the decision to proceed with the "Call to Disobedience". Asked whether he thought a culture of fear pervaded the Church, Mgr Schüller replied: "Yes. We have a culture of fear - not to speak out openly. That is not possible in modern society. We understand ourselves as obedient to God and to the people of God and their interests and we are obedient to a Church which is listening to the people."

■ Sarah Mac Donald writes for *The Tablet* from Dublin.

**DAVID BLAIR**

## 'The Copts saw Mubarak as a protector and a bulwark against the Muslim Brotherhood'



The twilight period between the fall of a despot and the emergence of a new and stable government is often the most dangerous time for a vulnerable minority. So it has proved for the Christians of Egypt in the aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's overthrow. Last Sunday, at least 26 were killed by military police who opened fire with live rounds on a Christian demonstration in central Cairo. This protest followed the burning to the ground of a church in southern Egypt, an attack apparently condoned by the local governor.

No one doubts that since Mr Mubarak's political demise in February, sectarian tensions have become more acute. The exact size of the Christian - or Coptic - minority is unknown, but they are believed to total between five and 10 per cent of Egypt's 80 million people. As such, they are numerous enough to carry some political weight. And yet they have grown more vulnerable for two principal reasons. The military government which succeeded the *ancien régime* appears too weak and indecisive to protect minorities, even if it had the will. And some officials, notably the provincial governor who allowed the destruction of the church, clearly do not.

Moreover, Christians are widely blamed for having supported Mr Mubarak's rule. Across the Middle East, dwindling and often persecuted Christian minorities are faced with two stark options as they struggle for survival. They must either seek the protection of outsiders, or form an alliance with what appears to be the most powerful indigenous political force. The Copts, led by Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria, chose the second course and allied themselves with Mr Mubarak. They saw him as a reliable protector and an immovable bulwark against the fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood.

But the immovable leader proved mortal after all, much to the apparent surprise of Pope Shenouda, now 88, who made his sympathies clear during a singularly ill-judged appearance on state television less than a fortnight before Mr Mubarak fled Cairo. "We have called the

president and told him we are all with you and the people are with you," were the Pope's quixotic words, even as vast crowds denounced Mr Mubarak in Tahrir Square. To those Egyptians who cheered the dictator's downfall and seek revenge against anyone who supported his 30-year rule, the Copts appear an obvious target.

In the political ferment that now grips Egypt, almost anything is possible. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which now rules, first said that it would hold power for only six months until presidential and parliamentary elections could be held. This timetable, always unrealistic, has been abandoned and it seems the generals will stay in control until the end of 2012.

Meanwhile, myriad parties, factions and trade unions have come back to life after decades of repression. Day after day, they flood the streets and demonstrate in Tahrir Square. Civil servants want higher pay; the Muslim Brotherhood, banned under Mr Mubarak, is active; while those who want to vent their frustrations on a vulnerable Christian minority are clearly taking their opportunity.

Suddenly, public opinion has assumed an importance it never had under Mr Mubarak. After terrorists striking from Egyptian territory killed eight Israelis in August, Israel responded with a military strike that killed five of its neighbour's border guards. Once, this would have produced ritual condemnation from Cairo and silent anger on the streets. This time, a mob stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo, the only physical reminder of the Camp David peace accords, and the diplomats had to be rescued by commandos.

How this period of turmoil will end is impossible to predict. If Israel were to respond to rocket attacks from Gaza with another military campaign, similar to the 21-day war that broke out so suddenly just after Christmas in 2008, then Egypt's rulers would come under intense popular pressure to respond. They are already in a precarious position. Instead of dismantling Mr Mubarak's apparatus of repression, they have kept the notorious emergency laws and continue to bring their opponents before special military courts. Field Marshal Mohammed Tantawi, the country's de facto ruler, is clearly as nervous as everyone else. Until a free election is held and Egypt acquires a legitimate government, the country will endure a fraught and dangerous period. As before, its Christians will be in the front line.

■ David Blair writes for the *Financial Times*.