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Austrian Catholics a thorn in Vatican's side

By VERONIKA OLEKSYN (AP)

VIENNA — Long a thorn in the Vatican's side, Austrian Catholics have ramped up their quest for a more liberal church in the wake of the global clerical sex abuse scandal.

And while much of the push for change comes from the grassroots, the country's powerful cardinal recently caused a stir with strong gestures in support of reform, raising the stakes in the confrontation between the Vatican and dissidents pushing to allow priests to marry and women to be ordained.

What is particularly troubling for Rome is that Austria — historically a major symbol of Catholicism in Europe and a bulwark against the Protestant Reformation — is losing worshippers in record numbers as calls for reform grow stronger.

Tens of thousands of Austrian Catholics — many of whom still consider themselves devout believers — are leaving the church each year, disgusted by the priestly sex abuse scandal and frustrated by what they see as the Catholic hierarchy's outdated ways.

For 76-year-old Erwin Bundschuh, who left the church about six weeks ago, the main problem today is an ivory tower mentality that rejects dialogue and cuts itself off from the realities of the modern day.

"You can't redesign a religious community every day but you also can't pretend as if nothing has happened in 2,000 years," said Bundschuh as he strolled past Vienna's famous St. Stephen's Cathedral. "There should be an open dialogue about certain things but it's always choked off."

Earlier this week, the head of the Vienna archdiocese's church tax office estimated that up to 80,000 of Austria's roughly 5.5 million Catholics could leave the church this year — a new record. Last year alone, 53,216 people formally had their names removed from church registries, a 31 percent increase compared to 40,654 in 2008.

Many have dropped out to also avoid paying a highly unpopular government-imposed church tax, questioning whether they should help finance an organization with which they have increasingly divergent views.

As the sex abuse scandal has heated up, critical Austrian Catholics have stepped up their reform campaign — holding news conferences and pressuring church officials.

In May, the Priest Initiative — a group of critical clerics — adopted a strongly worded resolution that criticized the "absolutist" church structure and urged both bishops and ordinary believers to take a stand. The Vatican has had no comment on the turmoil in the Austrian Church.

Amid increasing calls for change, Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn — the country's top churchman and a papal confidant seen as a possible successor to Benedict XVI — has stepped into the fray more forcefully in the past few months.

At a March service for sex abuse victims in St. Stephen's Cathedral organized with a reform group, he was among the first high-ranking Catholics to openly acknowledge church guilt in the scandal.

More recently, he accused Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the retired Vatican secretary of state, of blocking an investigation into sex abuse allegations against his disgraced predecessor, Hans Hermann Groer, 15 years ago.

He also spoke of the positive aspects of gay relationships and suggested the church needed a new perspective on the remarriage of divorcees.

In addition, Schoenborn recently declined to publicly criticize Eisenstadt Bishop Paul Iby, who made headlines when he said it should be up to priests to decide whether they want to live a celibate life and that he would welcome it if married men could be ordained. The 75-year-old bishop also said the ordination of women should also eventually be considered.

When asked by The Associated Press what he thought of Iby's comments, Schoenborn replied: "I think that the worries Bishop Paul, Bishop Iby, has expressed here are the worries of all of us — there's no question about that."

To reformers like Richard Picker of the group Priests without Office, Schoenborn understands the plight of clerics who choose not to live in celibacy. "The cardinal has understanding for us," Picker said.

But others cautioned against overrating the softspoken Schoenborn, saying he has shown understanding for those who don't fall in line in the past but has failed to come up with concrete actions to support them.

Described as someone who tries to please everyone and dislikes confrontation, Schoenborn initially stayed quiet when he replaced Groer in 1995 amid abuse allegations. Only three years later did he personally apologize "for everything that my predecessors and other holders of church office committed against people in their trust."

"Rome gets on his nerves and he sends signals but he'll never contradict the pope," said Herbert Kohlmaier, a former politician and national ombudsman who heads a reform group called the Lay Initiative. "He won't cross that line."

Experts say Austria's unusually rebellious streak these days stems from a series of conservative Vatican appointments — including Groer's — following the retirement of the liberal and outspoken Cardinal Franz Koenig, a much beloved figure, in 1985.

"The church took a new turn after Koenig and that, coupled with the Groer pedophilia story, sparked dissatisfaction," said theologian Paul Zulehner. "Austria is a special case caused by Rome."

The Groer scandal erupted in 1995 when a former student of his alleged that he abused him in the 1970s. Other accusations followed. Groer stepped down shortly after the first allegations surfaced and was later forced by Pope John Paul II to relinquish all church functions. He died in 2003 but never directly admitted any guilt.

The disgust surrounding Groer resurfaced recently when the Alpine country — like several others — was hit by a new wave of abuse claims against clergy and employees of church-affiliated institutions such as schools.

"The abuse scandal has shown that apparently the church's leadership is no longer primarily focused on Jesus' message but rather on its own interests," said Hans Peter Hurka, who heads We are Church, an influential Vienna-based lay organization active across Europe.

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