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The folly of German bishops making Catholics pay

Comment is free The German Bishops' Conference issued a decree last week warning those who opted out of paying the country's "church tax" that they would no longer be entitled to the sacraments, to a religious burial or to play any part in parish life. The measure, which only just stops short of formal excommunication, has shaken the German Catholic church at a time when it is already facing serious challenges. The drive to designate non-paying adherents as outcasts who have committed "a grave offence against the Christian community" has been met with distaste by both liberal and conservative Catholic groups in Germany, and the issues that this case raises go right to the heart of the shifting nature of Catholic identity.

Germany's church tax is worth €5bn a year to the Catholic church, with those registered as Catholics paying an additional 8-9% of their income tax bill (Protestants and Jews also contribute to their own groups under the same terms). A simple de-registration will stop the tax being levied, but faced with haemorrhaging numbers (181,000 people left the German Catholic church in 2010 alone), the German bishops have upped the ante. **Among those speaking out against the decree is the liberal Catholic group We Are Church, founded in Austria following the child abuse case of the archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër – one of the earliest cases to come to light in the international church. This is the backdrop to the church tax case, and the nature of many German Catholics' disillusionment with their church was made clear by Christian Weisner of the group when he said that the hierarchy should seek to "be better bishops" rather than "introduc[ing]" stronger lures for church membership.**

Germany is not alone in readdressing the issue of how its churches fund themselves. In Poland a major shake-up of church funding is being proposed. The Polish state currently provides the Church Fund, which gives 89 million zloty a year (£17m) to support the dominant Roman Catholic church, as well as minority faiths. A more German-style contribution system is now being discussed, where Poles can opt in to allot a proportion of their taxes to their church. The clergy would lose state-funded social security and healthcare under the changes, and the Catholic church has protested that the fund is its right since it was set up by the communists to compensate for lost episcopal lands. However, the fact that around 80% of the funding of the Polish Catholic church currently comes from casual donations indicates that there is plenty of willing among the faithful to produce the cash. Secularist values may be on the rise in Poland, but the Polish church is unlikely to need to resort to the German bishops' strong-arm tactics if the proposal goes through.

The levying of a church tax is of course nothing new. Deuteronomy speaks at length of the tax due from the people to the Levite priests for the maintenance of the tabernacle, namely "the shoulder and the breast" of any ox or sheep slaughtered, as well as "first-fruits also of corn, of wine, and of oil, and a part of the wool from the shearing of their sheep". In the New Testament we hear of Jews paying a temple tax and of Jesus himself paying it on arrival in the fishing village of Capernaum (things being made easier by the required half-shekel miraculously appearing in the mouth of a fish). Here religious tax is an act of allegiance and a statement of identity. The more sceptical attitude towards state taxes, meanwhile, is illustrated by the story of the publican Zacchaeus, who climbed a tree to watch Jesus enter Jericho. The local people see this tax collector for the Romans as a sinner, but Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house and he repents.

While the allegedly sacrilegious meeting of faith and the fiscal has been the focus of much comment in this case, the shadow of Zacchaeus is also present in it. The taxes he collected were resented because they were levied by an unaccountable, distant authority who seemed to care little for those it was taxing. In the German church tax controversy we see a similar sentiment being expressed and evidence of an increasing feeling of disconnect and estrangement from the church among the faithful. For many this is a matter of "no taxation

without representation". Until German Catholics feel that their church really does represent their values, and they identify with it wholly and freely, the numbers leaving will only increase, and the reduction of Catholic identity to whether or not one has paid the membership subscription is unlikely to improve matters.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/28/german-bishops-making-catholics-pay?newsfeed=true>

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