

Pope Benedict's retirement has many European Catholics hoping for reform

Reformers are pushing for a new vision of the Church

By Karen Pauls, CBC News

Many devout Catholics in Europe feel that church doctrine and social reality have drifted too far apart - and that it's time for a change.

But no matter who is chosen as the new pope, it won't be enough to spur Chris Fischer to return to the parish pews.

"For me it's over, it's really over. Because I think there are so many things they [the Catholic Church] have to change," he says, taking a deep breath and gazing out the window of a restaurant near the Munich Cathedral.

Fischer and countless others say they have been victimized twice. First, by priests or nuns who sexually or physically abused them. Second, by a church structure that protected the perpetrators and has been slow to offer help and healing to the victims.

Fischer was 12 years old when he was sent to a boarding school in southern Germany run by a Vatican missionary order.

"The sexual abuse usually took place in the evening. The priest would come to our bed and ... touched us," Fischer says, haltingly and mostly in German, adding that he doesn't remember all the details.

"This happened over many, many years. And to many, many boys who were abused. The biggest problem for me was that I considered it as [personal] dedication, as love. But it of course had nothing to do with it, but rather ... [the priest] just took what he wanted. And he left us boys behind, completely disturbed."

Fischer, now 46, repressed memories of the abuse until three years ago. He left the Church and is now trying to find healing on his own.

"The Church cannot help me (in) processing the past. I don't want any support from this Church as it stands now," he says.

Chris Fischer says he and other boys were sexually abused by a priest at a boarding school in southern Germany more than 30 years ago. He's left the Catholic Church, but is watching the events in Rome with interest. Karen Pauls/CBC

Fighting from the inside

Whether it's because of the sex abuse scandals or a more general perception as being outdated, the Catholic Church has been losing support in many parts of Europe.

When the German-born Benedict became Pope in 2005, many in his home country rejoiced, hoping he would revive Catholicism. But statistics in Germany illustrate the slide in support – more German Catholics are being

buried each year than baptized. In 2010, 30.2 per cent of Germans were Catholic, compared to 42.7 per cent before reunification in 1990.

Father Helmut Schueller is a parish priest near Vienna, Austria, who has started an international reform movement called the Parish Priest Initiative. It's calling for major changes to the Catholic Church. (Karen Pauls/CBC)

Among German Catholics, ties to the Church vary considerably. According to a 2009 survey by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, 17 per cent refer to themselves as "believing, committed to the church," 37 per cent as "critical, with ties to the church." Almost 50 per cent refer to themselves as "distanced," "unsure" or "not religious."

In Austria, the Catholic Church saw a record number of membership cancellations in 2010.

Still, people like Father Helmut Schueller say disaffected Catholics should stay and fight for changes – especially now, at a time when he feels the door is open for real reform.

'We will continue our fight. Independently. ... If we don't have change in our lifetime, maybe next generation.'—Father Helmut Schueller, Parish Priest Initiative

Schueller is a parish priest near Vienna, Austria, and the founder of an international movement called the Parish Priest Initiative (PPI). One-tenth of the entire Austrian clergy, more than 500 priests and deacons, are members.

Schueller says now is a crucial time in the history of the Catholic Church – a time when it can either become important to people's lives again or fall further into irrelevancy.

"The first job of the next Pope is to change it to a system with civil rights in the Church, respect for the faithful and with the possibility to share in the decision-making. A lot of issues have to be changed, but unless he addresses the system, everything else is for nothing," Schueller said earlier this week, during a brief stop in Munich while on a speaking tour in Germany.

The Parish Priest Initiative is best known for its 2011 report, Call to Disobedience, which advocates for radical changes on issues such as the administration of communion to remarried divorcees, women's ordination, celibacy and giving more power to the local clergy and church members.

Some people call Schueller a reformer. Others have labeled him a dissident and rebel. In November, the Vatican announced it was stripping him of the title "monsignor" as a punishment for his activity.

Schueller says he's not out to destroy the church, but to help save it from internal corruption and rebuild its credibility and integrity after the sexual abuse scandals.

"Some are dreaming of a mighty Church, a powerful Church with a strong position in society. Others think that's not the way the Church should go," he says.

Finding 'a new way in this time'

"Jesus started with fishermen and including those outside ... I think we should find this original beginning. The Second Vatican Council wanted to do it. Pope John XXIII tried to do it, so I think the idea is already on the way. The Holy Spirit will make it possible to find a new way in this time."

And what if the new Pope is not a reformer?

Christian Weisner of the 'We are Church' reform group stands outside the Munich Cathedral, the seat of the former Archbishop of Munich, Joseph Ratzinger. A bust of Pope Benedict XVI greets visitors to the church. (Karen Pauls/CBC)

Public opinion is divided. A recent report by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre found 46 per cent of American Catholics believe the Church should “move in new directions,” while 51 per cent say it should “maintain traditional positions.”

Catholics on both sides disagree with those numbers and the research methodology, but there's no doubt both reformers and fundamentalists are passionate and engaged.

Christian Weisner is the spokesperson for an international group called Wir sind Kirche, or We are Church, which is planning a news conference in Rome on March 5 to try and influence the cardinals as they meet to select a new pope.

“I think the Catholic Church with the theology of Pope Benedict is in a dead-end street, it can't go on like this,” Weisner said as we sat on the steps of the Munich Cathedral, seat of the Archbishop of Munich – the position Joseph Ratzinger had before becoming Pope Benedict XVI.

Weisner points out that the Christian church has changed many times in its 2,000-year history and insists it must do so again.

“The Church has to go back to its roots, to care about people, accept people, to accept women as equal persons and to find rules of good living,” he says.

“I think the Roman Catholic Church with 1.3 billion members all over the world is an enormous power for justice, but first, we have to clear up our internal structure, we have to fight for justice inside the Church. Only then can we fight for justice in society.”

Window of opportunity

Christoph Markschies, head of the department of ancient church history at Humboldt University in Berlin, says Benedict had a very specific goal as Pope – to step away from the world and become a small but powerful influence in society, much like the early church was. Markschies argues that, to a large extent, Benedict accomplished that.

Christoph Markschies, the chair of the department of ancient church history at Humboldt University in Berlin, says Pope Benedict achieved what he set out to do. (Karen Pauls/CBC)

“Benedict deepened this gap between church and society because he was interested to deepen it. He wasn't interested to move the Church towards modernity or what people are thinking at the moment. Benedict was convinced if the Church is moving towards modernity, she's leaving her identity,” explains Markschies.

Benedict sometimes pointed at Protestant Christianity as an example – a version of Christianity that has divided into hundreds of denominations, each with different positions, beliefs and rituals, offering believers something they can feel comfortable with.

“[Benedict's idea was]> if you enter a shop with thousands of burger options, it's difficult to choose. A shop

presenting only one burger with specific spicy taste will survive better than the store opposite with large options. This idea of bringing numbers down by concentrating on a certain identity will help the Catholic Church survive," says Markschies, himself a Protestant.

'A Pope has to be conservative, he has to conserve what exists ... the important part of Christian faith.'—Stefan Foerner, spokesperson, Archdiocese of Berlin

Stefan Foerner, spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Berlin, says Benedict had no choice but to be conservative, even in the face of mounting scandals and falling membership.

"A Pope has to be conservative, he has to conserve what exists, what is important, the important part of Christian faith. He's responsible for this. He can't say, 'Hey, I change my mind,'" Foerner says.

Still, he agrees this is a moment when all Catholics should think and pray about what the Church and the Pope mean in the modern world.

"I think he stands for the unity of the Church. Maybe it's the opportunity to think about what makes the Catholic Church, what is important for the Catholic Church to be one Church, to keep the Church together, all the people together, maybe that's the opportunity."

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