

Delegates from international reform groups meet in Austria

From October 10th to 12th Sean McDonagh and I attended a meeting of renewal and reform groups in Austria. There were people, lay and cleric, men and women, from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, United States and Ireland, -- about thirty people in all, at the meeting. It was a great experience, and I was glad to be there.

Among the issues discussed were:

1. How to respond to the new message coming out from the Vatican since Pope Francis was elected. We were generally impressed by what he was saying, though with some reservations. Does he really mean these things? And if he does, will he be able to bring about the necessary structural changes to make them happen? The women among us were disappointed by some of his statements about women, particularly his emphasis on women as mothers (which they saw as traditional stereotyping!) and his call for a 'theology of women' (why separate women as if they were a different species?). But, allowing for these reservations, there was a general feeling that Pope Francis was at the least creating a new atmosphere in the Church and deserved our support and encouragement.
2. The Synod on the Family. The meeting agreed that if this synod consisted only of cardinals, and other celibate clerics, it would be of little use. A lot of discussion concerned how to find ways of influencing the make-up of the synod, and ensuring that the voices of families and women would play a significant part. Specific actions are being planned in this area.
3. With declining numbers of priests, what happens to parishes without priests? This is a more urgent reality in some European countries, and in the United States, than it has become here as yet – though of course it is only around the corner for us also. Two points were strongly made: (i) That it was a shame that local communities were deprived of the Eucharist because of the rigidity of the Church in not being able even to discuss the limits placed on those who are eligible for priesthood. (ii) That parish communities should be much more assertive, and not allow themselves to be dispersed at the orders of a bishop. It was clear to me that some local communities on the continent and in the U.S. were much more organised and vocal than parishes here in Ireland. We need to hear the voices of the lay Catholics more strongly in this country.

On the final morning, at a general session, some of the difficulties (the ‘wounds’ was the word used by the facilitator) faced by reform groups, and by the Church in general, were aired. Two in particular caught my attention.

(a) There can be a degree of tension between priests and women in the movements. Some priests prefer to work only with other priests, because when women are in the group it is inevitable that the difficult issues around women’s place in the Church are brought up, and many priests prefer not to discuss them. Some women in the group expressed a great deal of hurt over their treatment in the Church, and strongly asserted that no real reform can happen without the active involvement of all.

(b) That led on to another major ‘wound’ of the Church, the way it deals with people of differing sexual orientation, the LGBT group. One priest spoke openly and very impressively about his experience of being gay and a priest. He talked of his struggle, and how he had now come to a place of contentment in himself and in his priesthood, while being very unhappy with a lot of what the Church says about gays. He then went on to tell us that he agreed with those who said that there was a greater percentage of gays among the clergy than in the population as a whole, maybe especially among the younger clergy and those in higher office. While he believed that this in itself should not be seen as a problem he felt that it may have an impact on their attitudes and beliefs around priesthood, and that it would be good if these matters could be openly discussed in the Church. The group was impressed by this contribution, but we neither had the time nor, I suspect, the ability to pursue it further.

I think that meetings like this are of immense importance to us here in Ireland. (I was at a similar type meeting in London in August). It is a source of great encouragement to learn of the wide range of groups springing up in many parts of the world among lay and clergy, and how their agendas have so much in common. I get a strong sense that the movement for reform and renewal has great momentum now, and I am hopeful that it will not be denied. Of course the presence of Pope Francis is a big help. The people I have met from the various different countries are enormously impressive, and the energy that is present in these meetings is to me a sign of the Spirit at work. Let us hope and pray that this be so!

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<http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2013/10/report-on-international-meeting-of-reform-groups-in-austria-tony-flannery/>