

"Who are we to close doors? In the ancient church we had the office of the person opening the doors to let the people in. But there has never been an office of somebody closing the door!"

Pope Francis, morning mass, May 12, 2014

Statement of the Austrian Priests' Initiative on the Excommunication of Martha and Gert Heizer

Vienna, May 26, 2014

We, the Austrian Priests' Initiative, are deeply concerned about the actions the Church's leadership has taken against Martha and Gert Heizer. The Excommunication was levied against two Church members who have worked for the reform of our Church with great passion, commitment, and energy. This decision is a fatal signal for all who are hoping, together with Pope Francis, for a kind Church that is close to the people. What kind of signal is being sent by a Church that punishes the perpetrators of sexual abuse among its ranks less severely than Church members who, by the way they practice their faith, express their great sufferings at the fringes of the Church's existing set of rules?

The opinions may differ about the step that Martha and Gert Heizer have taken in celebrating the Eucharist without a priest. It may be seen as a prophetic step that points the way to an overall reform of the Church, or it may not be seen that way. The Priests' Initiative sees Eucharist and priestly office as belonging together – as long as the Church is able to provide priests to its communities, who share peoples' lives and share their journey of faith. But with present developments in the Church fewer and fewer communities have the option of a Eucharistic celebration on Sundays with an ordained priest being present. Martha and Gert Heizer are touching a sore spot: the Eucharist, the mass, the central celebration of our faith and of life as a community, is becoming increasingly rare due to the shortage of priests. For this reason the church reform movements have advocated for a long time that the priesthood should be open to married men and women and that the with the participation of the citizens of the Church new forms of leading the communities should be developed.

The "Ex-Communication" of Martha and Gert Heizer does indeed signal the end of communication in the sense of an open and fair dispute. This way of proceeding is not only completely out of proportion, but it shows the inability of the leadership of our Church to settle differences of opinion and conflicts in accordance with the gospel in a kind and loving way. This is a failure that nobody can be proud of.

We appeal to all persons in leadership positions to reverse the Excommunication and to take up instead an honest and fair dialogue with the church reform movements about the future of the Church.

The Priests' Initiative
Signed by Helmut Schüller, President