

Rebel priests defy Vatican, vow to bless same-sex couples

VIENNA (Reuters) - A dissident band of Roman Catholic priests leading a disobedience campaign against the Vatican said on Tuesday they would carry on blessing same-sex couples in defiance of Church orders.

The Vatican said on Monday that priests cannot bless same-sex unions and that such blessings are not valid, in a ruling that disappointed gay Catholics who had hoped their Church was becoming more welcoming under Pope Francis.

In some countries, parishes and ministers have begun blessing same-sex unions in lieu of marriage, and there have been calls for bishops to institutionalize de facto such blessings. Conservatives in the 1.3 billion-member Roman Catholic Church have expressed alarm over such practices.

"We members of the Parish Priests Initiative are deeply appalled by the new Roman decree that seeks to prohibit the blessing of same-sex loving couples. This is a relapse into times that we had hoped to have overcome with Pope Francis," the Austrian-based group said in a statement.

"We will — in solidarity with so many — not reject any loving couple in the future who ask to celebrate God's blessing, which they experience every day, also in a worship service."

The Parish Priests Initiative led by Father Helmut Schueller has long been a thorn in the side of the Vatican. The group wants Church rules changed so that priests can marry and women can become priests.

It has said it will break Church rules by giving communion to Protestants and divorced Catholics who remarry.

Founded in 2006 by nine priests, the initiative says it now has around 350 members from the ranks of the official Church and more than 3,000 lay supporters.

The Vatican in 2012 cracked down on Schueller, stripping him of the right to use the title monsignor and saying he was also no longer a "Chaplain of His Holiness".

Schueller, a former deputy to Vienna archbishop Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, had been given the honorary title in his capacity as head of the Austrian branch of the Catholic charity group Caritas.

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