

Church reform in Austria

Four Austrian associations have joined forces under the name 'Kirchenreform.at': 'Wir sind Kirche', the 'Laieninitiative', the 'Pfarrerinitiative' and 'Priester ohne Amt'.

'Wir sind Kirche' ('We are Church') goes back to the church referendum initiated in 1995 by Thomas Plankensteiner, Martha Heizer and Bernadette Wagnleithner. It was a popular initiative in the style of popular initiatives in Austrian state law, which contained five demands for the church: '1. Building a fraternal church, full equality for women; 2. free choice between a celibate and non-celibate lifestyle, 3. positive evaluation of sexuality as an important part of the human being created and affirmed by God, 4. good news instead of a threatening message.' It was signed by over 500,000 people, i.e. around 10% of Austria's voting population. Subsequently, 'Wir sind Kirche' was initially established as a platform and has been an association since 1996. Martha Heizer has been chairwoman since 2014.

The next big step was the founding of the 'Pfarrerinitiative' in 2006, in which around 400 ordained priests have organised themselves. They are insisting on changes, not least because of the working conditions that have become unbearable for full-time priests. Its chairman is the former Vicar General of Vienna, Helmut Schüller.

The 'Lay Initiative' was founded in 2009 in analogy to the Priests' Initiative. It brings together laypeople who are openly committed to a contemporary church and work towards this. In doing so, they utilise the greater degree of freedom compared to the reformist clergy. Ewald Benes was chairman until 2023; the successor is currently still open.

'Priests without ministry' is an association of around 700 ordained and married priests in Austria who have publicly acknowledged their partnership and have therefore been excluded from exercising their ministry by the Roman Catholic Church. The chairman is Herbert Bartl.

The associations act both individually and together, in particular through joint press releases and the 'Church People's Conference', which takes place annually in autumn and is dedicated to current issues. The 'Trumpet of Jericho' is awarded at this conference. This prize is awarded to people from all over the world who responsibly violate church rules in order to bring about changes to them, especially if they have been punished by the church leadership, e.g. by restricting their career; if they have the courage to publicly break away from sectarian groups within the church, especially if they have been spiritually or sexually abused and publicly document the church's abuse of power; or who make the need for church reform visible to the public in other ways.

Thomas Olechowski, 9. 5. 2024