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A Place for Dissent

Something of a consensus exists among church historians that, had the Vatican treated Martin Luther and his circles in a more conciliatory manner at the start of what became the Reformation, it might not have happened. Many of the theological points he was raising were subsequently found to be valid, not least his denunciation of the sale of indulgences. But the rough rebuttal he received led him to adopt positions ever more extreme until there was no reconciliation to be had on any terms. This is a lesson of history that needs to be recalled with some urgency in the case of the Vatican's treatment of the mass movement Wir sind Kirche (We Are Church). It began in Austria in a revolt by many parish clergy and laity at the refusal of Cardinal Groer of Vienna to resign in the light of allegations of the sexual abuse of a minor, which were subsequently recognised to be well founded. Now the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, the highest court in the Catholic Church, has ruled that members of We Are Church may be excluded from official church bodies because of their dissent to church teaching in certain areas, including advocacy of the ordination of women.

The example of the Reformation may have been in Pope Benedict's mind when he made conciliatory overtures to the Lefebvrist movement the Society of St Pius X. He was eager to find a basis on which they could return to full communion with the Holy See, a policy somewhat derailed when it was pointed out that one of the Lefebvrist bishops was a Holocaust-denier and anti-Semite. Far from healing a split in the Church, therefore, a further wedge was driven between the Catholic Church and the Jews. Subsequently there was more criticism from church leaders of Pope Benedict's handling of the matter, including his failure to consult with his own advisers, than anybody could remember. Indeed, he admitted mistakes were made.

The issue of how to treat dissent in the Church is a highly sensitive one. Is it inconsistent not to show the same conciliatory attitude towards We are Church as was shown towards the Society of St Pius X? Is dissent on the left different in kind from dissent on the right? Possibly the Signatura's ruling, which is applicable at the discretion of the local bishop, could be construed as the mildest sanction available, and falls well short of excommunication, suspension of priests from their faculties, refusal of Holy Communion, or other ecclesiastical penalties. It may be designed to avoid the rise of partisanship in church bodies, which would be divisive and contrary to their participatory and collaborative spirit. But it still looks like an official censure, even an attempt to nudge members of the We Are Church movement towards the door.

Thousands of German and Austrian Catholics, disillusioned by a perceived refusal to take their concerns seriously, have ceased to practise their faith in recent years. Clumsiness in dealing with We Are Church now can only increase that number. If the Catholic Church is to look like the People of God it has to be an inclusive family, able to contain dissent and embrace dissenters on left and right, not an ever-shrinking sect reserved for the pure.
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