02 2013

Shelter in the Votive Church

Impressions of a Supporter of the Refugee Protests in the Votive Church

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"A votive church is a church that was built as a sign of gratitude for being rescued from a hardship or as a supplication for a certain wish to come true, at times also for atonement." (Translated from Wikipedia, 24 January 2013)

Beginnings – Seeking Shelter before Christmas

On 24 November, refugees and supporters marched from Traiskirchen to Vienna and set up a camp in Sigmund Freud Park near the Votive Church. The media and politicians had ignored their demands, such as the right of residence and work. For this reason, but also due to increased police pressure on the refugees, after two weeks of discussions among refugees and activist supporters, it was decided on 18 December that they would seek shelter and support in the Votive Church. In hope of raising a

broader awareness for the topic, gaining greater media attention and the support of the church before Christmas, a group of refugees and supporters held a press conference in the church.

The activists had counted on the support of the Votive Church's priest, Pater Joseph Farruggia, who had been one of the first to support the Refugee Camp and its demands. This initial declaration of solidarity changed, however, as the activists entered his parish church. An ultimatum for the refugees and supporters to leave the church (by 6 p.m. the same day) was followed by threats to call the police and fits of rage. The multilingual "tourism priest" of Vienna was obviously overwhelmed by the situation and the fact that the police did not drive them out of the house of prayer that first day is undoubtedly owed to mediation by church officials from higher up.

That first day, the situation therefore initially looked ill-starred, as it had begun with the Votive Church priest's rejection and reservations from well-known supporters. In addition, other priests who were approached were quickly overwhelmed and refused their support.

What could be done? One hour before the ultimatum ended, a general assembly of refugees and supporters in the church decided to stay, against the priest's will. Half an hour before the church closed at 6 p.m., mattresses and blankets were brought in from the park and the refugees built a makeshift mattress camp in a side wing of the church.

Shortly after 6 p.m., when the conflict with the priest was on the verge of escalating, an episcopal vicar and the Caritas (Austrian Catholic Relief Organization) stepped in to mediate, and an array of other actors and (media) observers tried to persuade the refugees

and their supporters to leave the church. After a conversation in the sacristy that went on well into the night, they permitted to refugees to spend one night in the church.

Despite the cold inside the church – at this time, it was much warmer next to the campfire in the park –, over the next few days, more and more refugees decided to move into the church, due to the increase in police controls at the camp and rumors about an imminent eviction. From the beginning, however, there were refugees who didn't want to sleep in the church because they felt it was neither safe nor an acceptable place to stay.

Shortly before Christmas, on 22 December 2012, due to increasing pressure and more arrests, some refugees decided to enter a hunger strike. Moreover, a refugee speaker announced "a big surprise" for Christmas Eve day. This sounded alarm bells for supporters and Caritas: To what extreme were the refugees willing to go with their urgent protest and resistance, so far that they would put their own lives in danger?

The situation of seeking shelter in the Votive Church before Christmas can be described as fraught and somewhat grotesque. In front of the main church door there were Christmas trees and the Refugee Camp info table, along with banners with things like "Refugees are Welcome." Milling about the church (which was still open 24 hours a day at that time) was a mix of Christmas tree vendors, refugees, supporters, Caritas staff, tourists, onlookers and reporters, as well as enraged readers of populist daily papers, and xenophobic characters who had come to rant and shout threats at the refugees. At night, drunkards from the nearby Christmas punch stands repeatedly entered the church, venting their racist anger with phrases like "I'm gonna burn you all, you parasites!"

First thing in the morning, the refugees in the church were woken by the angry priest, afterwards the Caritas staff kindly asked them to not take up too much space and move as far as possible into the corner. Electricity for the radiators was initially denied, they were forbidden to put up small tents to have a bit of protection against the cold in the lofty rooms of the church and the one toilet available could only be used for emergencies during the night. In response, the church management, which slowly became involved, kindly pointed out that the priest did not want them there and reminded them of the alternate accommodations Caritas had offered them. In the midst of this, there were also several exceptionally cooperative and helpful supporters from Caritas and the parish who showed them access to the power supply (against the priest's will), so that they could have at least a few radiators.

Not only the church management but also in the media, coverage was slyly dominated by Caritas's version of events in the church, in which they attacked supporters, accusing them of disrupting and taking advantage of the situation. The refugees and their supporters did not intend to disrupt the church proceedings and cause any problems, but they also weren't prepared to be thrown out of the church—neither by persuasion nor threats. On the contrary, the camp in the church slowly grew and more and more refugees moved from the park into the church or came from other parts of the country to support the cause.

On 24 December, the refugees were awoken by numerous reporters and camera teams looking for images for their Christmas Eve stories. The Caritas and the heads of the deaconry sat down next to the refugees and spoke briefly with them. Next to a small manger installation in front of the mattresses there were signs with phrases like "Jesus was an asylum seeker!" "We are Joseph and Mary!"

Both Christmas masses were rather grotesque: the priest, in full regalia, stood in front without mentioning the refugees at all. The first rows, which were warmed by indoor heaters, were filled by the rather small parish (80-100 people) who looked back from time to time with abashment and interest. In the last third of the side wing were the refugees with candlelight and no electricity. Supporters who were handing out Christmas greeting cards from the refugees at the exit were dragged away from the church by undercover police and security. Two individuals who wanted to place a poster near the altar as an "intercession" during communion were rudely escorted away by the police, despite the prayers of the holy evening. The police presence made it clear that they had access to the church from the onset, with the priest's and Caritas' knowledge, and were prepared to intervene at any given time.

After the events of Christmas mass, the church management became stricter and Caritas repeatedly demanded lists with the names of those present.

Camp in the Church

On the night of 27 December, police and clearance services evicted the refugee camp at Sigmund Freud Park so thoroughly that only light patches of grass remained as reminders of the tents. At first, it was unclear if the police were going to evict the church as well (although the church door had been locked for the first time, in agreement with the refugees). The atmosphere was completely dismal and filled with anxiety for quite a while. Information about arrests, police controls and missing persons kept coming in via cell phone, but at least a few refugees managed to get into the church through a back entrance.

The next morning, (church) celebrities showed up again and showed their solidarity in front of the cameras by sitting down next to the refugees. They were surrounded by countless photographers and reporters that were covering the eviction of the camp and the situation in the church.

Shortly thereafter, the priest locked the church, declared it closed until further notice and explained that as of now, security guards would watch the side entrance, a list was to be drawn up with names of the refugees who would have access to the church, and that in addition to Caritas staff only five supporters were permitted to in the church. The priest repeatedly threatened to notify the police if the rules were not followed. Caritas tried to calm the furious supporters and slowly ease them out of the church. At the same time, press releases were issued claiming supporters were trying to convince the refugees that the tea was poisoned and that they should not speak to Caritas.

An external management was forced upon the protest in the church, separating those on hunger strike inside the church from those outside the church who wished to join the protest. What had begun as an open situation of co-existence among refugees, church visitors, tourists, supporters, Caritas staff, media and others had turned into a state of isolation. The media continued reporting on poor victims who had been taken advantage of and weren't able to speak for themselves and the supporters who disrupted Caritas' work and were encouraging the refugees to be disobedient in their protest.

The hunger strike, however, brought the community in the church (mainly consisting of Pakistanis and Afghans), closer together and they understood that their resistance was now at the center of attention. The refugees were indeed speaking for themselves,

repeatedly stating their demands for the cameras, retelling their stories of flight in interviews and stressing the moral aspect of their resistance through their hunger strike.

Over time, also among the refugee group, mechanisms of exclusion came into play, e.g. regarding the question of which refugees were on the list of those allowed to enter the church and which were not. Many thus indirectly helped implement the rules set up by the church and accepted the control system set up by the management, despite initial attempts to resist both. Many of those involved and supporters put up a brave front, as no one was interested in an escalation of the situation, which was already extremely precarious.

Gradually, the media coverage contributed to broader support within civil society, which also increased the pressure on politicians. A few days before the New Year, on the eighth day of the hunger strike, Cardinal Schönborn [the archbishop of Vienna,] showed up to talk with the refugees himself and shortly thereafter, the minister of the interior, Johanna Mikl-Leitner invited a few of the refugees to her nearby office to generate media attention and to once again clarify that their demands could not be met.

The living conditions of those on hunger strike in the church were extreme, as it was cold, there was no place to wash, etc. Despite the exceptional situation and the public pressure a daily routine emerged, including talks and lively debates, visits by celebrity supporters and journalists, Facebook campaigns, German courses, in addition to an increase in emergency medical aid of the refugees on hunger strike in the church.

In the following two weeks, politicians stalled to gain time and banked on the ignorance of the people. Nine days after the camp had been evicted, Mayor Michael Häupl admitted to having been

informed about the plans in advance and once again portrayed the refugees as victims and political pawns. This made it clear that the municipal government's support would only be scant. In all this, at least the media reports on the refugees' fates were more positive than in the past.

The refugees refused the repeated appeals made to them to leave the church and move into available warm quarters: they wanted to stay until their demands were met. Many in the church also refused to take part in the collective assemblies of supporters and refugees, and thus an ever-growing divide between "inside" and "outside" emerged, one that was separated by a church door guarded by security personnel.

Time was running out, nerves were frayed on all sides, assemblies were disrupted due to a lack of a culture of discussion and patriarchal demonstrations of power, the refugees were growing weak, supporters were exhausted and the political and media attention focus had shifted toward the national referendum on the armed forces. Nonetheless, the refugee standpoints and demands appeared in the media and political discourses time and again, thanks to intense PR work, demonstrations, celebrity supporters and the refugees' donation of 3000 Euros to the Caritas at the SOS-Mitmensch Gala [A benefit event hosted by one of Austria's largest human rights pressure groups] on 20 January.

Simultaneously, the pressure on the police and clerical charitableness was mounting: on 12 January, four refugees were arrested near the Votive Church (they face deportation soon and are on hunger strike). In a press release, the Caritas shared the supporters' and refugees' objections to the constant surveillance through the regular visits to the church by undercover police. At the same time the church management upheld their strict door

policy and the isolation of the refugees, ignoring requests and objections made by the refugees, supporters and sympathizers of the cause who were also appalled by the situation. The cross-barred and guarded door that visibly separates the refugees from the outside world symbolizes the imprisonment of the protest in the church through managing and controlling charitableness.

One month after the hunger strike began, the church management emphasized that the situation in the church was escalating and that a solution needed to be found soon, suggesting relocation and an end to the hunger strike. On 21 January, Cardinal Schönborn visited the refugees again and tried to persuade them to move into a nearby monastery. Once again, after deliberation, the answer was no. After intense discussions, the refugees decided to break the hunger strike for ten days, until February 1, in order to be fit for the political negotiations and to be permitted to remain in the church. “We did not come to die,” says Khan, one of the refugees, repeatedly, refusing to take up the position of a victim.

For the first time in Austrian history, refugees and migrants are clearly and loudly demanding their human rights and are thus being heard and acknowledged in public discourse. The political and clerical pressure is mounting. But the struggle for the refugees’ human rights continues — it will surely be long and tedious process, but the decision is clear: they will continue to fight.

P.S. The Votive Church in Vienna was built upon the initiative of Kaiser Franz Josef’s brother, the later emperor of Mexico, Maximilian of Habsburg, as a symbol of his appreciation and as an offering for the failed assassination of the Austrian ruler. Maximilian, who donated an image of the indigenous Virgin Mary of Guadalupe to the Votive Church, was overthrown as the ruler of

Mexico by revolutionary and anti-colonial movements and executed. The image of the Holy Mary of Guadalupe, a symbol of the resistance against colonial rule, remains on a side altar in the Votive Church.

This text pictures the situation of the protest as it was until the beginning of February 2013.

