

VIENNA

Archbishop Schönborn: how the man for all seasons secured his survival

ECCLESIA

28_01_2025



**Stefano
Fontana**



The Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, Christoph Schönborn, turned eighty on 22 January and has left the scene of official Church politics. No doubt, we will continue to hear from him, as emeriti are often more talkative than ordinaries. But his time is running out.

The media does not consider every cardinal and archbishop who turns eighty worth mentioning. But they do feel the need to talk about Schönborn as an interesting case. This happens only when the octogenarian is the symbol of something, he has been a figure larger than himself throughout his career, he has embodied a 'type', both human and ecclesial, in a way he has defined an epoch. To speak about him, then, is not just for his individual biographical significance; it's not a matter of writing someone's history, but of giving a cross-section of the Church in a precise period.

Cardinal Schönborn's era is that of the transition to the pontificate of Francis.

The cardinal is a man of studies, a Dominican by training, was made a cardinal by John Paul II and was considered "very close" to Benedict XVI. On the main issues of concern to the German-speaking Church, he has always maintained a balanced position, without taking sides. Bearing in mind that he was ordained priest by Cardinal König, the one who brought Karl Rahner to the Council, and that during his long episcopate (1995-2025) the diocese of Vienna had experienced great tensions of disobedience from grassroots ecclesial groups, it can be said that his management was one of stigmatisation of excessive novelties and of essentially maintaining the line of the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, navigating through them without any jolts.

On 27 March 2008, in an intervention on *Kath.net*, he took a hard line on contraception, abortion and homosexuality, claiming that on these issues Europe had said 'no' to its future three times. The following year, at a press conference in Vienna, he spoke of the failure of Catholic bishops to support Paul VI on *Humanae vitae*, leaving the Church without the courage to oppose abortion and homosexuality. He had also been vocal, perhaps too vocal in this case, on the issue of abuse in the Church, but in the end he stood by the hard line of Ratzinger-Benedict. From a noble family, cultured, well-balanced, very well integrated in the Vatican congregations, the cardinal seemed to be a point of reference of some reliability in the seething world of Central Europe.

Then came the change of course, catalysed by the two-stage Synod on the Family (2014-2015), of which he was a protagonist, and the exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. With two famous interviews by Antonio Spadaro in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in September 2015 and July 2016, he presented himself as the official interpreter of the controversial exhortation. After all, he had been the one who had presented it at the Vatican Press

Office, and Pope Francis, in one of his answers to journalists on the plane, had referred precisely to Schönborn to those who asked for the correct interpretation of a text with many ambiguities.

In these interviews and in other speeches, the cardinal showed that he had fully embraced the innovations of *Amoris laetitia*: he spoke of a "historic synod", celebrated the method of discernment, said that the Church's task was "to observe, to accompany, to discern", said that starting from doctrine alone was like proceeding with recipes when each case is different from the other. But already in 2014, in an interview with Gian Guido Vecchi in *Corriere della Sera*, he had expressed the deceptive main criterion of the new morality of family life: "In every situation you can always see what is missing or what is already there ... If something is missing, it does not mean that there is nothing positive. It is in this small but significant error that the whole difference **with the previous era lies**."

This was followed by other revealing steps, such as welcoming transsexualism during the commemoration of AIDS victims on 1 December 2017 in St Stephen's Cathedral: "In the Lord's colourful garden there is room for all multitudes". More recently, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the *Responsum* of February 2021, in which the Doctrine of the Faith prohibited the blessing of same-sex couples, agreeing with the contrary position of the *Instruction Fiducia supplicans* (18 December 2023) of the same Dicastery.

Is this a case of opportunism? Was the five-year extension of his "retirement" - unprecedented in the current pontificate - a "reward for loyalty"? For sure, it cannot be everything. Some would even deny that there has been a turning point, attempting to make Schönborn a proof of continuity between Francis and the two previous pontificates. But perhaps there is a simpler way of explaining these things. Even in the Church, the waves of theological novelties - the 'winds of doctrine' - are like disruptive floods, spreading, penetrating everywhere, conditioning, dictating the line, imposing themselves and creating conformity. Many are led to follow the current in order to say they can be counted on and so as not to be cut off, in order to have the certainty they are keeping up to date.