

## REFLECTIONS ON PRIESTLY MINISTRY

One of the blessings of old age is the vast panoramic vision it affords, enabling us to put in perspective events and personages of the past. From this arises a deeper wisdom. It permits us to wend our way more comfortably amid conflict and confusion.

I was in minor orders in the seminary (1958) when a papal conclave occurred after the death of Pius XII. No one, we thought, could take the place of the pious and intelligent Eugenio Pacelli. Seminarians posted on the bulletin boards pictures of the *papabili*, i.e., those considered favorites in the election. We confided our choices to one another.



**Anthony Kowalski**

My friend Ray, always the comic, said that he favored the pudgy little Italian. "He looks so warm and kind and friendly, you just want to hug him," he said.

We all laughed. His choice stood in stark contrast to the ascetic Pacelli. When the white smoke arose and the announcement was made, we flocked to the bulletin board to see what this new Pope looked like. To our surprise it was the pudgy Italian, Roncalli, who would transform the Church.

In the days that followed, we underwent a whirlwind of change. Like most young priests at the time, I heartily embraced the reforms. When Rome urged that priests join together to work more closely with their bishops in pursuit of pastoral needs, we set up a senate of priests for the Diocese of Paterson (1967). I was elected its first secretary, then later its vice-president.

Shortly thereafter, our senate was invited by a group of priests in Chicago to come together to consider organizing a national assembly of priests. I was sent as one of

two representatives to discuss the matter. At that meeting in Des Plaines, Illinois (February, 1968), delegates from senates and associations of priests nationwide agreed to establish the National Federation of Priest Councils (NFPC). I was privileged to attend as delegate the first two annual gatherings of that organization -- one in Chicago, the other in New Orleans.

At the time, I was rector of the minor seminary. During that six year term, I and my associates sought to implement the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Opposition to reform was evident at NFPC gatherings, at local senate meetings, and in seminary formation. Concern about the role of women in the Church and the need for a married priesthood became catalysts

for conflict. Rome was adamantly opposed to even a discussion of such matters.

I was moved in 1975 to request from Rome a dispensation to marry. When permission arrived in January 1976, my beloved wife Joan Sullivan and I were married at Holy Trinity, the Jesuit parish in Georgetown. It was not long before I was organizing again - this time regular gatherings of married priests and their wives in Virginia, as we sought to keep alive the necessary reform of the Church. We held periodic days of recollection under the guidance of such stalwarts as Walter Burkhardt SJ, Gerald Sloyan, F.X. Murphy CSSR, Sr. Theresa Kane, Anthony Padovano, Anthony Tambasco, Janaan Manternach and Carl Pfeiffer. The gatherings grew in numbers as we joined together with similar groups in Washington under the leadership of George Spellman and in Maryland under the leadership of Vic Santoro.

Once again I was invited to serve on the national scene. Terry Dosh, married priest national organizer, asked me to serve as representative of the VA/DC/MD group of married priests on the first Board of Directors for the Corps of Married Priests United for Service (CORPUS). Those initial meetings were inspiring. All of us on the Board were excited about the future, and were convinced of the need to advocate for women as well. That became obvious.

When the idea of organizing a national convention arose, we in the VA/DC/MD area agreed to undertake such an effort. Under the leadership of Jim Martin, the former head of chaplains at the Veterans Administration, we held our first convention of married priests on the grounds of American University (1988). It is

hard to exaggerate the enthusiasm and euphoria that we experienced there. Aroused by the eloquence of Anthony Padovano and the organizational skills of Frank Bonnike, we left the convention inspired and invigorated.

Several encouraging developments added to our enthusiasm. Serious studies of the priesthood had been authorized by the American bishops under the leadership of sound professionals like Eugene C. Kennedy (psychology), Andrew Greeley (sociology) John Tracy Ellis (history) and Carl J. Armbruster SJ (theology). Their work pointed in the direction of needed reform. Then, alarmed by the seeming escalation of clergy sexual abuse, in May 1985, three responsible professionals - Michael Peterson, Thomas Doyle and F. Ray Mouton - prepared a manual and submitted it to the American bishops. It was titled: "The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy: Meeting the Problem in a Comprehensive and Responsible Manner." It was politely accepted by the bishops.

Unfortunately all came to naught. Professional researchers on the priesthood and professional counselors of priests forewarned of the impending crisis. They were ignored. The net effect is what we see today - vast decline in the number of priests and religious, escalating investigations of clerical abuse by attorneys general in states across the land, and scandal among the public not just in America, but worldwide.

Many good pastors and bishops have assisted us on our journeys. Bishop Frank Murphy of Baltimore, for example, has been a constant and firm supporter of women in positions of leadership in the Church, and for the return of married priests to active

ministry. He privately attended meetings of both groups to show his support. The same could be said of Bishop Ray Lucker of New Ulm in Minnesota and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle who have been bulwarks of strength and support for us. Each of these bishops has suffered at the hands of hierarchical overseers, yet remained faithful to the inspiration of the Spirit in prophetic witness during these troublesome times.

After a period of rigid and restrictive papal leadership, Pope Francis has given new life and hope to the reform movement. He has encouraged national groups of bishops to explore their need for more priestly vocations, including the possible reintroduction of a married priesthood as existed in the first 1100 years of Church life. He has also established a group to study the female diaconate. The predictable opposition of long-time power brokers has been mounted. Pope Francis' journey will not be easy. We must stand by him.

So where do we go from here? Now is the time to revive the joys and hopes inspired by the Second Vatican Council. Those were heady days in which we were touched by the Spirit, and we must not forget them. We have survived the bleak years of retrenchment on high. Chastened by that experience, we must not permit ourselves to become again disheartened. Instead, let us bring fresh energies to continue the renewal spirit of Vatican II and persist in our love of God and our commitment to the Church, recognizing that "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in them." (1 John 4, 16)

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We seek your comments and experiences on inclusivity, loneliness, successful parishes etc. Contact me at: [jimewe@me.com](mailto:jimewe@me.com)