

# 'Have wife, can minister'

## Married priests unite to press for active role

By Jason Petosa

Exclusive to the National Catholic Reporter

CHICAGO — Will the church find a ministerial role for its hundreds of married priests who want one? Will it find ministerial functions for those married priests who say they are "basically very conservative people"?

"We envision no protests, no demonstrations, no public celebrations, no ultimatums," insists a statement from the Corps of Reserve Priests United for Service (CORPUS), an active and growing association of married priests.

CORPUS organizers see their group as different from another organization that actively involves married priests, the Fellowship of Christian Ministries. The fellowship promotes the ministerial use of married priests, but it embraces other causes as well — and it licenses ministers without official church approval.

CORPUS would do no such thing.

Several months ago four married priests in Chicago mailed the CORPUS idea to nearly 700 of the estimated 7,000 U.S. priests who have left the clerical life. Outdated addresses caused a fourth of the letters to be returned. But nearly 250 married priests — more than 40 per cent — responded and said they would serve in any kind of ministry if church authorities would use them.

In exclusive interviews with NCR, CORPUS organizers discussed their objectives. "A number of us who get together socially wondered how many married priests really are interested in an active ministry," Frank McGrath, who was in parish work for 15 years before his marriage, told NCR.

"Bishops frequently argue that only a handful are interested," he said. "So we set out to establish that at least 100 married priests still want to serve the church. We felt that number was significant enough to make our point."

The CORPUS organizers said they expect a gradual acceptance of married priests as responsible men who can prove they are not going to bring down the house because they are working in it. (A recent survey by the National Opinion Research Center revealed that 80 per cent of the U.S. Catholic laity would approve a married clergy, and that 79 per cent favor it.)

CORPUS' thrust is that many married priests value their priesthood no less now than before marriage, and that the church ought to use their services in a variety of part-time and full-time ministries.

The organizers stress that such is CORPUS' sole purpose. These married priests want to operate within the official church structure: "We're basically very conservative people," said McGrath, who teaches policemen in Chicago's City College.

The CORPUS statement assures: "Our approach shall be direct, respectful and hopefully honest. It shall also be firm, forceful and political. We make our approach as responsible men, not as disobedient children, but as men with something valuable to offer, yet men still awed and humbled by the realization of our priesthood."

William Nemmers, a CORPUS organizer who worked for 12 years in Chicago's north side parishes, said, "We want to be openly recognized as priests even though attainment of a full sacramental and liturgical ministry probably will have to come in stages."

McGrath said many married priests have greeted CORPUS as "the first sign of hope they've seen in a long time. They're so glad somebody's interested. We have enormous difficulty reaching married priests. It's as if they've disappeared into a wilderness and nobody knows where they are."

No mass reinstatement of married priests is foreseen by CORPUS organizers. They look for reconciliation on an individual basis, with each married priest dealing personally with a local bishop. The idea is to match particular priests with the needs of local churches.

"A lot of other priests are afraid that everybody who left will want to come back," said McGrath. He suspects that roughly one-third of the resigned priests surveyed want nothing to do with the church's ministry.

"However," McGrath said, "we wouldn't want everybody back either. Some resigned priests weren't qualified and didn't function well."

"Procedures have to be set up for recertification of married priests. Once the problems are worked out — even on paper — I think most fears about recertifying married priests will be removed," McGrath said.

(The National Federation of Priests' Councils — NFPC — convention last month voted overwhelmingly to seek cooperation with the National Catholic Bishops' Office on Priestly Life and Ministry "to facilitate efforts to reconcile and reinstate married priests." The NFPC convention also voted to seek cooperation with the Canon Law Society of America to develop a recertification process.)

"Of course the other side of the coin," said McGrath, "is that there are some celibate priests who aren't qualified, don't work well and shouldn't be certified either. It's basically a problem of accountability, whether we're talking about married or celibate priests."

McGrath attended the recent NFPC convention as a delegate from the Association of Chicago Priests. That organization has about 30 married priests among its 500 members.

CORPUS has been financed by the four organizers who contributed \$50 apiece. An occasional respondent sent a few dollars for postage and materials. A recent mailing to the 250 CORPUS "subscribers" asked for \$25 from those able to afford it.

CORPUS organizers besides McGrath and Nemmers are Frank Bonnike, former NFPC president and now a Catholic lay chaplain in a large suburban hospital, and Thomas Hund, who works with a credit rating firm.

Bonnike said CORPUS organizers intend to work for a favorable response to NFPC resolutions. Future CORPUS actions might

include translations of the NFPC statement for other countries, "particularly in light of the recent Brazilian bishops' decision to invite resigned priests to cooperate in phases of the ministry."

Other possible actions proposed to CORPUS subscribers include conversations with Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and with Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate.

A copy of the CORPUS statement was sent to the five bishops attending the last Roman synod. Archbishops Bernardin and John Quinn, of Oklahoma City, acknowledged receipt of the statement.

Bonnike said, "It's a pity that resigned priests desiring a ministry to people have to go to the government or to private industry for meaningful work. In my own case," he added, "I had to go to the American Lutheran Church to find a position where I could function as a lay chaplain and as a Catholic."

"The married priests I know well," said Bonnike, "are men who served people in many ways. They've been cut off now with a special hurt — because they loved somebody, they had to stop serving others. Married priests," he said, "are like any other priests: they simply want to serve in what they do best and like most."