

## 2,000 meet to call for reform in Detroit

**DETROIT** -- As the inaugural convention of the American Catholic Council was drawing to a close June 12, an estimated 2,000 reform-minded Catholics stood en masse to endorse a 10-point Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities that asserts primacy of conscience and the right of every Catholic to have a voice in the way the church is run, as well as an obligation to advance the proclamation of the Gospel to the world and the church's social teaching.

The approval of the document followed two days in which speaker after speaker articulated the participants' frustration at growing clericalism in the church and what they viewed as sustained efforts by church authorities to slow down or reverse many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

They took issue with a wide range of teachings, policies and practices in the church -- from the bans on artificial birth control, women priests and married priests, to the church's treatment of women.

Speakers criticized the way bishops have handled clerical sex abuse; the church's treatment of gays; lack of consultation with the laity; mismanagement of church funds and property; closings of parishes and sales of the closed churches to pay off diocesan debts; and politicization of the Eucharist by some bishops who threaten to withhold Communion from insufficiently pro-life politicians.

They objected to Vatican rules requiring literal translation of Latin liturgical texts and forbidding or sharply limiting the use of inclusive language in the liturgy.

For a single reporter who could cover all the main talks but was able to attend only a few of the dozens of simultaneous smaller-group breakout sessions held during the meeting, it was difficult to discern which issues were the most crucial to the group, but four, all interconnected, seemed to stand out:

- **The role of women:** the church's increasingly hard-line prohibition against women priests, its refusal to consider restoration of women to the diaconate, Vatican opposition to inclusive language, the denial of many church offices to women, and the fact repeatedly testified to by participants that many priests and bishops are insensitive to women's concerns and react with fear, invoking their authority instead of engaging in constructive dialogue.
- **Restorationism:** Speakers and participants widely shared the view that under Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, John Paul II, there has been a serious backpedaling on many Vatican II teachings and reforms -- liturgical reform, lay participation, church engagement in the world, consultation in church decision-making, to name just a few.

- **Hierarchical authoritarianism and clericalism:** In many areas, among them a revival of episcopal threats of excommunication or other church penalties as a response to dissent in matters open to serious debate, speakers and participants regarded the exercise of hierarchical authority as increasingly authoritarian in recent years. They also considered clericalism, concerned more with priestly and episcopal prestige and power rather than pastoral care and service, a growing issue in numerous areas of church life.
- **Inculturation:** An underlying issue, reflected in all three other areas, was a concern among speakers and participants that progress in the dynamic of inculturation of the Gospel and the church around the world has been increasingly stymied over the past three decades or so by Vatican decisions requiring global uniformity and rejecting local initiatives in many areas -- perhaps most notably in quashing official attempts by bishops' conferences to advance the inculturation of the liturgy. Speakers and participants found an increasing dissonance in recent decades between Vatican II and Pope Paul VI's goals of greater inculturation and the global uniformity imposed by Paul's successors.

The June 10-12 American Catholic Council meeting closed with a Sunday Mass that provoked controversy before and after, with Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron prohibiting his priests and deacons from participating on penalty of laicization.

Attendees participate during the opening prayer service at the American Catholic Council meeting June 10. (NCR photo/Sara Wiercinski) Despite Vigneron's threat, council co-chair Janet Hauter said in an e-mail to *NCR* after the meeting, "The estimate we had was 100 [Detroit archdiocesan] priests as they were recognized by others. Interestingly -- and somewhat humorous -- some registered under pseudonyms, so we had [the late German Jesuit theologian] Karl Rahner and [the late French Dominican theologian] Yves Congar and others."

"Fear is an ugly thing, isn't it?" Hauter added. "We did hear, however, extreme gratitude [from the Detroit priests who attended] for stepping out, giving the priests hope."

She added that many of the participants were women religious, and organizers heard that "several are asking to be on the next agenda of their community's gathering to inform them of the ACC, asking them to step up as well, following our lead."

It appeared that well over half the participants were 65 or older and most of the rest were at least 50. There was only a small scattering of those in their 20s, 30s or 40s. Demographic figures the council organizers reported from pre-meeting listening sessions across the country over the two years leading up to the Detroit meeting seemed to support this observation.

Detroit participants were also overwhelmingly white, with only a tiny black and Hispanic presence.

Anthony Padovano -- a theologian, convention speaker, one of the council's founders, and first president of CORPUS, an association of resigned, married priests seeking inclusion of married and female priests in the Catholic priesthood -- told *NCR* that organizers "tried hard" over the past two years to reach out to black and Hispanic Catholic organizations and leaders and encourage their participation, but they received almost no positive response.

An interesting statistic on participants in the listening sessions -- almost certainly mirrored in the convention -- was their educational level: Sixty-five percent of those who answered the listening session survey said they had at least a master's degree.

Most of those interviewed informally by *NCR* in Detroit over the course of the meeting were actively engaged not only in parish affairs, but also in other church-related activities, and most of them clearly had graduate degrees -- often in fields closely related to their involvement in church activities.

By this reporter's estimate, two-thirds of the convention participants were women, and a significant number of them were women religious.

Keynote speakers at the convention included:

- **James Carroll**, a former priest and the author of *Practicing Catholic*, who delivered an impassioned address on why he finds remaining Catholic a part of the core of his being, despite the tensions he often confronts. "We are here out of love for the Catholic church" that transcends any differences, he said. Many participants informally interviewed by *NCR* regarded his talk as the most inspiring and challenging of the meeting.
- **Swiss-born theologian Fr. Hans Küng**, 83, one of the most prominent theological experts at Vatican II, who for reasons of age and health addressed the gathering in the form of a videotaped interview from his home near the University of Tübingen, Germany. He urged a "peaceful" revolution of the world's Catholics against what he called an "absolutism" of papal power today, comparable to the absolutism, rooted in the idea of the divine right of kings, of French monarchs overthrown by the French Revolution in the 18th century.
- **Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister**, who on the final morning of the meeting urged conference participants to challenge priests and bishops for whom "political power is more important than spiritual leadership." At Vatican II, she said, the world's bishops "told us we were the church, and we thought they meant it," but persistent church demeaning of women, alienating the central actors who raise the next generation of Catholics, threatens the very lifeblood of the church's future, she said.
- **Anthony Padovano**, who argued forcefully from historical and theological resources for a return to more democratic forms of church governance and for greater recognition of Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman's idea of

the *sensus fidelium* -- the consensus of baptized Catholics -- as the primary basis for determining what Catholic faith says. If today's church were operating on that basis, Padovano claimed, Catholic teaching or practice would be far different today on artificial contraception, married priests, women priests, gay marriage and the advance of ecumenical relations with other Christian churches.

- **Jeanette Rodriguez**, a Latina scholar and professor of theology at Jesuit-run Seattle University, who delivered a highly nuanced analysis of the challenges Hispanic theologians face on inculturation questions as they try to assess the theological and ecclesial significance of Hispanic Catholicism - a minority soon destined to become the majority of U.S. Catholics.
- **Matthew Fox**, a former Catholic Dominican priest who became an Episcopal priest in 1994 rather than submit to silencing by the Vatican after his writings on spirituality challenged Catholic teachings on original sin. Fox described the Vatican as in schism from the real church and urged council participants to join him in ignoring edicts from Rome and to follow Christ on their own.

Fox was a last-minute substitute for Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a member of the Kennedy clan and a former Maryland lieutenant governor, who could not attend the meeting as originally planned.

Several participants questioned by *NCR* described Fox's talk as the least challenging of all the major talks, saying his proposal to consider Rome in schism and go their own separate way was rather superficial and not a realistic option for those committed to stay the course and challenge church trends from within.

But one participant from an upper Wisconsin parish, attending the convention with his wife, told *NCR* June 11 that he was so "mad as hell" at recent church decisions that he would seriously consider becoming part of a church that formally separated from Rome.

[Jerry Filteau is **NCR** Washington correspondent.]