

The American Catholic Council – Detroit June 10-12, 2011

“Seeking a better Catholic Church”

By
Ken Trainor

On Pentecost weekend (no coincidence), 1,800+ progressive, reform-minded Catholics came together from across the U.S. and Canada (plus a smattering from other parts of the world), to attend the American Catholic Council conference in Detroit. The ACC is an attempt to create an umbrella organization uniting smaller groups like Future Church, Call to Action, Voice of the Faithful, Pax Christi, Women's Ordination Conference, SNAP and CORPUS, among myriad others.

Someday, a better, healthier, more sustainable Catholic Church may look back on Pentecost weekend 2011 as a beginning worth remembering. That remains to be seen, of course, but whatever comes of this, it was a good first step.

The stated intent was "Reclaiming the Promise of Vatican II" on the eve of that historic council's 50th anniversary. This year also marks the 35th anniversary of the founding of Call to Action here in Detroit by the still-revered Cardinal John Dearden.

Those in attendance were treated to rousing oratory from charismatic speakers, such as Anthony Padovano, James Carroll, Matthew Fox and Joan Chittister. Smaller "breakout" sessions considered a wide range of specific "Reform in Action" topics.

The Catholic hierarchy does its best to discredit these folks as divisive, wild-eyed radicals and fringe loonies who lack credibility. The current Archbishop of Detroit, in fact, trash-talked the ACC even before it began.

But they came across as normal, mainstream, middle-class lay people (including several from Oak Park and River Forest) who love their Church too much to leave it in the hands of those who seem hell-bent (so to speak) on its destruction. The wonder is that in spite of getting no reinforcement whatsoever from the institutional Church over the last 40 years, Vatican II Catholics remain devoted — although many will tell you they're not waiting for the hierarchy to approve their efforts. They're forging ahead in the direction the Council intended. As Anthony Padovano meticulously pointed out, there is a long tradition of Catholics taking matters into their own hands — and that is frequently reflected in the wording of canon law.

Or as Joan Chittister put it, "This isn't heresy. This is history."

After observing "the lowerarchy" in action for three days, I have to say what they're asking for does not seem excessive or out of line.

They aren't trying to make the Church a democracy. They're trying to make it more democratic — as it was in its first thousand years. At the very least, they want Church governance to be less of a monarchy.

They're asking for intellectual freedom so theologians don't have to live under the constant threat of being silenced or even excommunicated.

They ask that women and married men be allowed to enter the ordained ministry so that an estimated 3,200 parishes don't have to function without resident priests.

They ask that the laity be allowed to join the clergy in electing their bishops, which would improve accountability.

They ask that lay men and women be given greater oversight of, or involvement in, parish finances and planning liturgical celebrations.

They ask that disagreement and dissent be valued as a necessary expression of the faithful, not as a threat to be suppressed.

They ask for greater transparency in diocesan governance to prevent future scandals involving clerical and episcopal abuse of power.

They ask that the next time the hierarchy wants to tinker with the liturgy, they make a good-faith effort to involve the laity, many of whom are intelligent, creative, educated and, like the clergy, filled with the Holy Spirit.

They ask that the Pope and the Curia publicly and enthusiastically affirm the spirit and specifics of Vatican II as we near its 50th anniversary, acknowledging that the Church is the entire people of God and celebrating the primacy of the individual's informed conscience.

They ask that formerly taboo topics such as birth control, women's ordination, optional celibacy, and acceptance of homosexuals be put on the table for honest, open discussion.

They ask for greater ecumenical dialogue with those outside the Church and greater dialogue within the Church among those who disagree.

They ask that the hierarchy do some serious soul-searching and revive the kind of Church that Jesus would recognize, a Church less concerned with temporal, earthly power and wealth and more concerned with all God's people, Catholic or not.

And they're asking for a Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.

They ask, in other words, for what is reasonable to expect, given all that unfolded during Vatican II. They are not trying to divide or destroy the Church. They are trying to save this unhealthy, dysfunctional, overly centralized institution from its own self-destructive impulses.

It is a testament to their faith and devotion that even though the hierarchy goes out of its way to drive them out, they stay. But they don't stay quiet and they don't give up. They stay true to Vatican II, and their continuing presence must scare the bejesus (so to speak) out of the powers that be.

The lowerarchy represents the future of the Catholic Church — the empowered, emboldened, prophetic laity, just beginning to awaken. They can't be silenced, won't be driven underground, and their numbers will continue to

grow as the corrupt, institutional structure continues its slow-motion implosion.

The Catholic Church has changed, is changing, will continue to change, and the Holy Spirit seems to want it that way. And if the Holy Spirit wants it that way, there's not a thing the institutional Church can do about it — except try to stall the progress. Church authority does not reside within the Vatican. It resides within the Church itself, and the Church, as we all know from Vatican II, is the people of God.

The era of "pay, pray and obey" Catholicism is ending. The laity has but one demand of the Church hierarchy — that they be treated like adults and fellow stakeholders, not passive children.

According to Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II: "These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world."

The Catholics in Detroit on Pentecost weekend seem to be of the opinion that it's time for the laity to live up to its mission.

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