

NEWS RELEASE * National Federation of Priests' Councils
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National Priest's Group Imagines, Plans for the Parish of Tomorrow

Thinking “outside the box,” imagining new paradigms, letting mission drive the church, embracing diversity as a source of unity, transparency, faithful stewardship to future generations, multiple models in a universal church, nurturing lay ecclesial ministry - were just some of the terms and concepts shared and developed at the 41st convening of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. Gathered at the Omni Hotel at the Colonnade in San Antonio, Texas, nearly 200 priest-leaders from around the nation took up the challenge of imagining and planning for the future of parish ministry under the theme “The Parish of Tomorrow—Today.”

Fr. Richard Vega, priest of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and President of the NFPC, encouraged the Convention participants to remember that we do not minister alone, but alongside each other. Flanked by banners denoting the role of priests as Reconciler, Shepherd, Mediator, Comforter, Preacher and Teacher, Fr. Vega reminded the clergy that “We are priests best when we are priests together!”

In his keynote speech on Tuesday, Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, reflected on the pastoral document “As I Have Done for You”. The document was the result of a unique joint consultation of the archbishop and his priests in setting a 5-10 year vision for the archdiocese.

Cardinal Mahony began with the document's example of a mythical St. Leo's parish, describing a parish that is multi-cultural, steeped in the theology of Vatican II, with lay leaders reflecting the diversity of ethnicities, ages, genders and social classes of the parishioners, where the priests attend to multiple parishes, where there are a multitude of faith sharing groups and a strong recognition of the need for evangelization in word and in deed.

In elaborating on his theme, he emphasized that priests in such a parish must serve not only as sacramental ministers, but as “fathers within the Catholic community—holding a community together, calling forth the gifts, negotiating the tensions.” Priests are most effective, Cardinal Mahony said, “when they see themselves as part of the Christian family, not set apart from or above others.”

He cited a number of obstacles that must be overcome in facilitating the growth of vibrant parish communities, some of which are: harsh generational divides in presbyterates; getting a recording when calling a parish - the absolute importance of personal contact; the need for training candidates for priesthood to be collaborative; recognizing the cultural needs and gifts of priests coming from other

countries; too many homilies and liturgies based in unsound theology; the slowing down of social outreach and social justice activities; the struggles of laity regarding church teaching on sexuality; too many people getting married or having children baptized in churches away from their own. Overall, Cardinal Mahony offered great hope for the future of the church.

In an insightful presentation titled “Setting Our Ecclesial Gauges to Reflect a True Catholicism - Living and Ministering in Today’s Parish,” Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, author of many best-selling books on spiritual reflection, began his discussion of the future by reminding the participants what it means—and doesn’t mean—to be Catholic. “Catholic is a mark of our faith—universality, wide, radiating God’s universal salvific will.” He used a number of descriptors to capture both the gift and tension of being Catholic: it is inclusivity and compassion, beyond liberal and conservative, beyond the selective inclusivity and compassion of both the right and the left. Fr. Rolheiser quoted Jim Wallis: “Don’t go to the right; don’t go to the left; go deeper!”

Fr. Rolheiser also cited tensions: conservative vs. liberal; theological/academic vs. devotional; liturgical vs. pastoral; Eucharist in tension with the Word; private morality vs. social justice; prophetic vs. diocesan structures; compassion vs. programmatic; missionary vs. maintenance; elite vs. ‘the street;’ and, the kenotic in tension with the triumphant Christ, i.e., the Christ who is very much active, but melts in, disappears, and the Christ of alleluias and processions. He noted that these are tensions that the Church is expansive enough to hold. “We are large enough and inclusive enough to hold all of these and allow them to coexist, but never to diminish the dignity and respect due to the other.”

He used the example in Matthew 25, the only test in the Gospels as to whether we will enter heaven. “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate means “love everyone as God loves everyone.” To underscore this, Fr. Rolheiser used St. John’s text of the washing of the feet. He notes that by the time John wrote this, he would have seen 65 years of church life, both its joy and turmoil, and so John felt a need to underscore service emanating from the celebration of the Eucharist. “Jesus knew who he really was, that ‘he came from God and was going back to God.’ (Jn 13:3) He took off his ‘outer robe’ in order to serve. Once we take off our ‘outer robes,’” Rolheiser said, “we can serve anyone.” The tensions in our church and world will only be resolved if we can wash one another’s feet: “if pro-life can wash pro-choice’s feet and pro-choice wash pro-life’s feet; if immigrant can wash anti-immigrant’s feet and vice versa; if Dick Cheney can wash Osama bin Laden’s feet and vice versa; etc., etc. Common ground is found in humility and a willingness to serve; common ground is always higher ground.”

Fr. Rolheiser also used the account of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-37) to elaborate on this sense of the priest needing to be stretched. “‘Jesus was walking one day along the borders of Samaria and Galilee’ – he is walking the line of different ethnicity, different religion to encounter a different gender.” In the text the woman refers to Jesus as Son of David, but really gets his attention when she calls him ‘Lord, Adonai.’” Fr. Rolheiser noted that “yes, we are Son of David, but that we are also Lord, Adonai, i.e., God’s universal instrument of salvation.” When we are reminded of this, it should call us to a deeper sense of mission and vocation, to allow God to stretch us beyond our own limited concepts of who and who should not receive ministry from us, to truly be those instruments of salvation.

In a talk titled “The Call to be Paul: Lay Ecclesial Ministry Today and the Pastor of Tomorrow,” Dr.

Edward Hahnenberg, associate professor of Theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, highlighted the extreme importance of bishops and pastors to promote lay ecclesial ministry. Dr. Hahnenberg, a consultant in the preparation of the USCCB document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005), noted that lay ecclesial ministry may well be likened to the historical development of religious orders which were formed over a period of time, addressing the particular needs of the laity. Like lay ecclesial ministers, they were often welcomed with suspicion at first.

Statistics show that there are on average 1.6 lay ecclesial ministers in every parish in the US. “Lay ecclesial ministry,” Dr. Hahnenberg said, “is stretching our church in many ways, our understanding of call and vocation, especially since 73% of lay ecclesial ministers feel they are pursuing a lifetime of ministry.” The development of lay ecclesial ministry is due in great part to the openness and encouragement of priests and the groundbreaking ministry of religious men and women in setting the standards and clearing the path to fill these important parish ministries. “The continued growth of lay ecclesial ministry,” he says, “is incumbent on clergy embracing this new and growing form of ministry, and not seeing it as a temporary solution until the priest shortage ends.”

Elaborating on the notion of vocation, Dr. Hahnenberg suggested that we view it in terms of both uniqueness and universality. “Every human person is in some way like all others (*universality/connection to the divine*), like some other people (*vocation*), and like no other person (*unique gifts and experiences to bring to our vocation*). We need to claim each of these truths and not allow one to overwhelm the other.”

As priests, Hahnenberg says, “We need to answer the call ‘to call like St. Paul.’” In essence our ministry must extend beyond the celebration of sacraments to calling forth charisms from our people, shared in collaboration, always centered in Christ. “Priests, like St. Paul, must be both initiators and reconcilers.” He noted that St. Paul did not work alone; there are actually 95 individual collaborators named in Paul’s writings.

Rev. Allan Figueroa Deck SJ then shared his insights on “Awakening Our Pastoral Imaginations: Evangelizing Parishes”. Fr. Deck, the Executive Director of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said that “Everything must be grounded in church identity and our mission to evangelize.” He noted that we are at an exciting moment as we continue to welcome immigrants, embrace new cultures, draw more diversity into parish leadership, and invite every Catholic to become involved in evangelization. For Fr. Deck, evangelization has a robust meaning: “To lead people to a living encounter with God in Jesus Christ; To inculturate the Gospel message respective of the richness of all cultures; To engage in transformative action on behalf of justice and peace; and, To expand ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and common action for social justice.”

Of great importance, he highlights, that the church must follow the mission, not vice versa: “The mission has a church!” He stresses the need for a configuration of priestly life toward this sense of robust evangelization. Priests have a responsibility to build a sense of real belonging, an environment of real hospitality and inclusion, providing a wide range of differentiated ministries that meet the needs of the community, and be willing to work collaboratively with deacons, lay ecclesial ministers and the laity. “We need to fight a lingering and, in some places, growing clericalism that limits the call of lay people to share their gifts, not in competition, but in complementarity to the charism of the

priest.”

He emphasized that a true ecclesiology of communion implies more diversity than uniformity. Unity, different from uniformity, “is the product of hard work and time, not just wishful thinking.” The need for proper training of priests in collaborative ministry and cultural competency, as well as leadership training, cannot be overemphasized. “Future parishes will require generous and visionary pastors who embrace a broad sense of priesthood that stretches them and their people.”

Finally, he said that he could not overemphasize the great need to engage our youth in parish life and ministry, and the overwhelming necessity for more trained youth ministers.

In a faith-filled presentation, Ms. Kerry Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, offered an inspiring talk titled “Living in the World of Possibility—Right Now!” The purpose of the Leadership Roundtable is to bring the gifts and talents of strong business and religious leaders to support the temporal needs of the church, to promote best practices and proper stewardship. Ms. Robinson emphasized, “Money follows mission. She believes very strongly that fund raising is ministry, that donors are looking for something they can do to be life-giving, something that expresses a joy and confidence in the future. She also emphasized the importance of donors to see the joy in clergy and in their congregations.

One of their first projects was in support of the rebuilding and reopening of the Catholic schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. Over time the Leadership Roundtable has facilitated a great amount of fund raising and helping parishes, dioceses and religious orders adopt best practices and faith-based stewardship.

The Leadership Roundtable website can be resourced at www.nlrcm.org and at www.churchapedia.org. Two great resources offered through the website are: *Standards for Excellence: An Ethics and Accountability Code for Catholic Parishes*, and *Standards for Excellence: An Ethics and Accountability Code for Catholic Dioceses*.

In the tradition of the NFPC, awards were presented at its Thursday evening closing service. Fr. Eugene Hemrick received the NFPC Touchstone Award for his exemplary service over many years to priests and dioceses. Sr. Katarina Schuth, OSF received the newly created Mandatum Award acknowledging her leadership in enhancing the ministry of presbyteral councils, seeking to expound on the issues and concerns of priests, and contributing to the work and championing NFPC’s mission and goals in the public square.

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