

A Congress in Vienna

A brief history and account of the foundation of The International Federation for Renewed Catholic Ministry



The way consciousness evolves and develops is most fascinating. It does so, often subtly, in a manner that we are hardly aware of until the process is complete.

So it was at the 2008 Congress in Vienna. This was the tenth Congress of the International Federation of organizations seeking reform and renewal in priesthood and ministry. During that time, the Federation has had three names and has celebrated Eucharist in very different ways. A look at these titles and celebrations reveals astonishing changes in consciousness.

A Brief Historical Note

There have been eight Congresses, on three continents, of the original International Federation of Married Catholic Priests: 2 outside Rome, in Ariccia (1985; 1987); 2 in Madrid (1993, 2002); and one each in the Netherlands (Dorn, 1990), Brazil (Brasilia, 1996), the United States (Atlanta, 1999); and Germany (Wiesbaden, 2005).

The North Atlantic Federation for a Renewed Catholic Priesthood assembled in Congress once in Germany (Wiesbaden, 2004) and once in Austria (Vienna, 2008). In Austria, a decision was made to change our name and constitution and to meet as a new Federation (but always in line with what we were from the beginning) in London, in 2011, on the eve of the 50 anniversary of Vatican II. This will be the first Congress to take place in the United Kingdom.

Thus, there have been eight Congresses as an International Federation and two as a North Atlantic Federation.

Names Matter

We noted that titles and celebrations tell us something of how our consciousness has developed. Let us look at titles for a moment.

From 1985 until 2004, we assembled as the International Federation of Married Catholic Priests. We were “international” (from the Philippines, North America, South America and Europe). We

were a “federation”, not of individuals but of national and regional organizations (some 30 groups). We gathered delegates from both sides of what was then the Iron Curtain, from north and south of the Equator and from conservative, liberal, Catholic, Protestant and secular cultures. We communicated in three official languages (English, French, Spanish). We found remarkable solidarity among ourselves and an unexpected willingness of the world at large and the Church more specifically to hear our message and endorse our agenda.

That agenda was in our title. We were “married Catholic priests”. We put together what people once considered an oxymoron and we made it work as a reality. We were “priests” who remained so, Catholic, and now, married. We called for a recognition of all this and a reform of priesthood in the Latin rite, for the sake of God’s People and their pastoral needs. We argued for this change, furthermore, on behalf of the human and evangelical rights of priests and, indeed, to stress the dignity of marriage and family life. The mandatory exclusion of marriage for all church leaders, consciously or not, makes a dreadful statement about the value of women and family life.

Even as Paul VI and John Paul II resisted this reform, we were warmly received by cardinals (Koenig and Schönborn in Vienna; Basil Hume in London; by the vice president of the Italian Bishops Conference and, indeed, by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s ecumenical officers in London). We reached literally millions through interviews, newspapers, and television. The consciousness of the world-wide Catholic community shifted so dramatically in our favor that mandatory celibacy is a minority preference now throughout the Church. More important, we began substantial service to God’s People and we issued canonical and theological papers to explain this ministry.

As we entered a new millennium, we saw value in bringing this new consciousness into concrete change by focusing on continents rather than the whole world. Four regions were united as autonomous federations (Europe, Latin America, North Atlantic, Philippines) into a Confederation.

The name chosen by our region was the “North Atlantic Federation for a Renewed Catholic Priesthood”. The title expanded our inclusivity beyond “married” and beyond those already ordained. It welcomed all, from every sector of Church life who wanted a renewed Catholic priesthood. It did not exclude women or the call for their ordination; it blurred distinctions between clerical and lay life. Ironically, by limiting the region in which we now worked (North Atlantic rather than global), we expanded the horizons of inclusivity. The wisdom of allowing regions and their cultures to attend to their immediate pastoral needs was now clear. Some cultures preferred to go more slowly in the areas of women’s ordination and homosexual rights than the North Atlantic region did.

In any case, the North Atlantic Federation had a constitutional convention in Wiesbaden, Germany in 2003 and its first Congress, as noted, in 2004 in the same location. Indeed the North Atlantic Federation was affiliated with the European Network Church on the Move in 2008 in Strasbourg, France, the home of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. The North Atlantic Federation published *Ministerium Novum* regularly and planned the 2008 Congress.

At the 2008 Congress, a new Constitution was adopted and a new name: *The International Federation for a Renewed Catholic Ministry*. The stress now is on the categories that link Christians together, baptism and ministry. It is in these larger categories that the ordained ministerial priesthood has its roots. Indeed, no priest functions legitimately or pastorally without reference to baptism and ministry. The inclusivity is now so wide that it finds room for an Anglican bishop who attended our Congress and for women ordained by Roman Catholic bishops. All who seek the renewal of Catholic ministry find equal standing in the new Federation.

We have taken 23 years of history and reform commitments in a new direction.

Celebration

It is instructive to note how our liturgical celebrations have changed. In 1985, the Congress opened with Liturgy celebrated by a canonical, celibate priest, not formally part of the Federation but presiding to create legitimacy in some quarters. In 2008, a woman ordained bishop by a Roman Catholic bishop, presided. In the life of the Church, 23 years is a short span of time. In that relatively slight interim, canonical priests, married priests, a woman bishop and an Anglican bishop, baptized Christians in lay ministries and those not formally in ministry, homosexual Catholics and former women religious, all were united in the breaking of the bread and in the communion of Christ's presence. Such a gathering was beyond our ability to imagine in 1985 and, even if it were, it would have been beyond our ability to find such a gathering comfortable.

Speakers

At our meeting in Vienna in 2008 there were three major addresses and three reports from the field of pastoral initiatives. Two of the three major addresses were delivered by canonical priests and were a summons to reform and renewal.

André Lascaris is one of the four Dominican priest authors of the recent document, *The Church and the Ministry* (2007) which electrified the Catholic world. It calls communities without priests to select a pastoral leader and to ask the bishop to confirm or ordain the candidate. If the bishop should refuse, "on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as obligatory celibacy, parishes...are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine." The document urges "parishes to act in this way with a great amount of self-confidence and courage". As this practice becomes widespread it will compel bishops to "live up to their commitment to serve" and to allow communities the Christian life and leadership to which they are entitled.

André Lascaris received his doctoral degree in theology from Oxford University, was active in peace negotiations in Northern Ireland and taught in South Africa. He is an author and works at the "Dominican Study Center for Theology and Society" in Nijmegen, Netherlands.

Helmut Schüller is a diocesan priest of Vienna, Austria, served as Vicar General under Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and chaired the diocesan office for victims of sexual abuse. In 2006, he launched the "Parish-Initiative", protesting the merging of parishes and asking instead for recognition of the vocation of the baptized and the right of priests to marry. Three hundred

canonical priests have signed on to this initiative. At present, Schüller is parish priest at St. Stephen in Probstdorf, Austria.

Helmut Schüller made it clear that married deacons and formerly canonical married priests should be allowed to function fully in parishes where they are needed and wanted. This would be a first step toward a much more inclusive priesthood and ministry. Helmut Schuller urged canonical priests in the United States to form national “Parish-Initiatives” of their own.

Austria has been, perhaps, the foremost country in Church reform. Cardinal Koenig of Vienna was one of the major architects of Vatican II and a strong advocate for ending mandatory celibacy. The “We Are Church” movement began in Austria and collected one-half million signatures for Church reform from a Catholic population of six million. By comparison, the United States, with a Catholic population more than ten times that of Austria, could not gather more than 30,000 signatures. In Austria also, the ordination of Roman Catholic women priests by a canonical Catholic bishop, got its start.

The third major address was given by Leonard Swidler of Temple University, Philadelphia. A prolific author, editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and founder of the *Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church*, Dr. Swidler described in detail what a democratic Catholic Church would look like, how it would function and why democracy is in accord with Church Tradition. He made clear the necessity of constitutional and legal structures to mark the progress toward democracy and to assure its continuance.

Three reports from the field of pastoral initiatives followed. John Raymaker outlined ways to move toward Vatican III; Michaelita and Thomas Quinn explained the pluriformity of ministries in the Federation of Christian Ministries; William Manseau, president of Corpus, and Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, bishop, informed the assembly of the convergence of married priests and women priests in the renewal of the Church.

Officers and Executive Committee Board Members

One of the unique characteristics of this Congress was that the work of the Executive Committee and the decisions of the General Assembly were as important as the public lectures.

Beginning with the Executive Committee meeting in Ottawa in May, 2008 and continuing to the eve of the opening of the Congress in Vienna, drafts of a new Constitution, suggestions for a new name and an innovative roster of candidates for offices were finalized. The General Assembly endorsed unanimously the above-mentioned items. As we have noted, the new name brought with it a new theology, a new orientation, and a new vehicle for recruitment across a wide spectrum.

The new president is Simon Bryden-Brook. He is the first president who is a lay person and he is a citizen of the United Kingdom. Simon has been one of the formative influences in the 18-year old European Network and of the organization, Catholics for a Changing Church, in England.

The new constitution allows co-officers. Two women will serve as vice-presidents. Andrea Johnson, an ordained priest, was for many years executive director of the Women’s Ordination

Conference in the United States and is an organizer of the international Women's Ordination Worldwide. Michaelita Quinn is a co-president of the Federation of Christian Ministries and was co-director of the recent conference in Boston of the National Catholic Ministries Alliance.

Lambert van Gelder of the Netherlands is secretary. He has been with the reform priesthood and ministry movement since 1983 and has been an indispensable influence in its life for twenty-five years. A professional journalist, he edited Ministerium Novum for many years.

Wim van der Velden of the Netherlands has served as treasurer for many years and continues in this role. He is a long-time member of GOP, the Dutch national married priest association.

In addition to these five officers, four board members at large were elected: John Shea of Canada, president emeritus of the North Atlantic Federation; Anthony Padovano, vice-president emeritus of the International Federation and president emeritus of Corpus; William Manseau, president of Corpus; Hein de Jung of the Netherlands, long-time member of the Dutch national married priest association and its current president.

Conclusion

A Final Declaration, "An Appeal from Vienna", was approved and a press release was issued as the Congress concluded. *The Tablet* of London sent a reporter who was present throughout the proceedings.

This Congress had delegates from Austria, Canada, England, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. It might be argued that it was one of the most successful of our ten Congresses, especially in the new direction it offered for our future work.

Anthony T. Padovano
Corpus Ambassador