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American Catholic Council to convene in Detroit in June

by Jerry Filteau



Logo of the America Catholic Council

WASHINGTON -- The American Catholic Council, a reform group formed in Washington in September 2008, plans to hold its first national conference in Detroit June 10-12. The organization has already drawn fire from the hierarchy for parts of its platform.

Last October, Detroit Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron cautioned local Catholics not to attend the conference and ordered local parishes, schools and other Catholic institutions not to sponsor or host any of the preparatory listening sessions leading up to the conference.

In a media advisory, the archdiocese called the planned conference a "misguided effort" that proposes goals "largely in opposition to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council" and "distorts the true spirit of Vatican II."

Among organizations that banded together to form the American Catholic Council are:

- Voice of the Faithful, an international lay organization started in Boston in the wake of the clergy sex abuse scandal in order to promote greater transparency and accountability in the church;
- FutureChurch, a Cleveland-based Catholic group, headed by St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, that advocates expanding ordained ministry to women and married men;
- CORPUS, an organization of married priests seeking an end to mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests in the Latin church.
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Featured speakers at the June gathering in Detroit are to include:

- Famed Swiss-born theologian Fr. Hans Küng, ecumenical professor emeritus at the University of Tübingen, Germany. Since 1979, Küng has been barred from teaching as a Catholic theologian. Advance notices say that depending on his health, he may address the group only by a pre-taped video.
- Sr. Joan Chittister, former prioress of the Benedictine Abbey of Erie, Pa., a noted author and an *NCR* columnist who has often criticized church positions on a wide range of issues.
- Anthony Padovano, a theologian, author, former priest and former CORPUS president, who has long advocated the abolition of mandatory celibacy in the Latin church and other changes in church practice.
- James Carroll, a *Boston Globe* columnist, former priest, and award-winning author whose 2009 book, *Practicing Catholic*, is sharply critical of the papacy of Benedict XVI.
- Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, daughter of Robert F. Kennedy and former lieutenant governor of Maryland.
- Jeannette Rodriguez, chair of theology and religious studies at Seattle University and author of several works on Hispanic theology. Rodriguez also serves on the *NCR* board of directors.

In preparatory work for the Detroit conference, the American Catholic Council has held numerous listening sessions around the country and has drafted a "Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities." It says in part that every Catholic has the right to:

- "Develop an informed conscience and to act in accord with it."
- "Participate in a faith community" and have "responsible pastoral care."
- "Proclaim the Gospel and to respond to the community's call to ministerial leadership."
- "Freedom of expression and the freedom to dissent."
- "A voice in the selection of leaders and in the manner in which governance and decision-making are exercised."
- "Summon and speak in assemblies where diverse voices can be heard."

"Church leaders," it says, "shall respect the rights and responsibilities of the baptized and their faith communities."

"One must not be told that one becomes a Catholic at the cost of being less an American," the preamble to the Catholic Bill of Rights and Responsibilities says. "We cannot declare that fundamental rights have no place in the church of Christ."

"We often hear that the "church is not a democracy," " it adds. "This is not true: Ecumenical councils, papal elections and the election of religious superiors occur regularly. The first ecumenical council in 325 [in Nicea] declared that no priest was validly ordained unless the community made the selection. Popes

and bishops were chosen by the people at large. Fundamentally, Catholic doctrine maintains that the Spirit is given to all and that baptism makes every Catholic equal.?

On its Web site, americancatholiccouncil.org, the council describes itself as ?a movement bringing together a network of individuals, organizations and communities to consider the state and future of our church.?

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?We believe our church is at a turning point in its history,? it adds. ?We recall the promise of the Second Vatican Council for a renaissance of the roles and responsibilities of all the baptized through a radically inclusive and engaged relationship between the church and the world. We respond to the spirit of Vatican II by summoning the baptized together to demonstrate our re-commitment.?

Among other presenters at the June gathering, to be held at Detroit?s Cobo Hall Convention Center, are Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, a cofounder of New Ways Ministry and longtime advocate of fuller Catholic ministry to the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transsexual-questioning community; Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Temple University in Philadelphia and a founder of the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church; Diana Hayes, a leading African-American Catholic theologian; Jesuit Fr. James Hug and Dominican Sr. Maria Riley of Center of Concern, a Jesuit-founded social justice think tank; Barbara Blaine and David Clohessy, leaders of the Survivors? Network of those Abused by Priests; and Jason Berry, whose *NCR* writings on clergy sexual abuse of minors have helped change the way the church approaches that issue.

For complete details, visit: americancatholiccouncil.org

[Jerry Filteau, NCR Washington correspondent, is covering the Detroit meeting. Watch NCRonline.org for updates.]

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