NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

US priests form new national association

Robert McClory | Sep. 15, 2011

Fr. David Cooper

A national organization of Catholic priests has been formed and is in the process of informing the U.S. bishops of its existence and preparing to recruit priest members from around the country.

Fr. David Cooper, a Milwaukee pastor and chair of an eight-member organizing core, said the new Association of U.S. Catholic Priests has two major goals: to reach out in fraternal support to brother priests and to create a collegial voice so priests can speak in a united way.

Cooper told NCR, "More and more, priests find themselves living in isolated conditions," either because they are in small dioceses or in vastly scattered regions or because they find the heavy burdens of priest-scarce ministry overwhelming.

The association will stress "our common mandate to serve as Jesus served," Cooper said, but quickly added that it will also "hold one hand out to the bishops and one hand to the baptized faithful, the laity."

Voice will be an overarching issue, Cooper said: "For several decades priests did have a voice through priests' senates and councils. But in 1983 through a change in canon law these groups became the domain of the ordinary, and we lost our collegial voice."

Cooper insisted protest and disagreement will not be on the agenda of the new organization.

"During the first four years the association will be celebrating the Second Vatican Council," he said, "and next June on the 50th anniversary of the council's opening, we will hold a major convocation at St. Leo University in Tampa, Fla. The topic will be the liturgy, the first document approved at Vatican II."

Fr. Richard Vega, president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, said he supports the objectives proposed by Cooper and sees no likelihood of competition between the two groups since the association will have individual membership only, while the federation is based on diocesan council membership.

Vega differed somewhat with Cooper's interpretation of the 1983 change in canon law, however.

"There's a significant number of dioceses where the bishop is not both the president and the chairman of the priests' council," said Vega. "Where there's a priest chairman who can set the agenda, real dialogue can occur." The canons, however, require the bishop to serve as president in all cases.

Vega added he is fearful that the association, as it develops, may follow too closely in the steps of Ireland's new Association of Catholic Priests, which has already strongly criticized the Roman Missal translation, asked for a reconsideration of who can be called to holy orders, and endorsed the idea of a married clergy.

"Taking up those issues puts you into immediate conflict with the bishops," Vega said.

After a retreat at Chicago's St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Ill., in late August, the core leaders of the new U.S. priests' association sent a letter to New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, notifying him of the group's existence as a "free association of priests provided by Canons 215, 278.1 and 299."

Dolan was asked to inform his fellow bishops, and similar letters from the core group began going to every U.S. bishop beginning in early September.

Asked why a national association has not emerged before, Cooper said he didn't know.

"But when you look around today, you see everybody has a national association or conference," he said. "The bishops have a conference. There's an association of Catholic women, Catholic musicians, Catholic theologians, Catholic canon lawyers. Everybody but us. It's time!"

The creation of the association came about in part through an unlikely confluence of events: the setting up of a Web site in Seattle by Fr. Michael Ryan to allow people to protest the coming changes in the Roman Missal, the formation of the Irish priests' association, and an inspiration from the Association of Pittsburgh Priests.

Fr. Bernard Survil, a member of the Pittsburgh group (though a priest of the Greensburg, Pa., diocese), helped organize a questionnaire mailing to priests around the country, using contact information placed on Ryan's Web site as people signed the protest.

The questionnaire asked respondents to prioritize the same objectives the Irish had used in forming their association and to indicate their thoughts about forming a similar U.S. association.

Of the 250 priests who responded, Survil reported, the most favored objective called for an association dedicated to "full implementation of the vision and teachings of the Second Vatican Council with special emphasis on the primacy of the individual conscience, the status and participation of all the baptized, and the task of establishing a church where all believers will be treated as equals."

Survil, a longtime peace and human rights activist who served many years in Latin America, believes a national association, whatever its goals, will serve to broaden priests' perspectives all over the country.

"You know," he said, "especially in smaller dioceses where you have little outside experience, your attitude can become very provincial."

Another activist and core member, Fr. Len Dubi, found the early work of creating the new priests' group stimulating.

"There's so much enthusiasm among these priests from many dioceses," he said. "You could sense the love of God and Jesus pouring out. It's like the excitement we felt in the seminary -- even though the median age of our group is about 71!"

Dubi said he is hopeful the association will be successful in attracting young priests, Latino and other minority group priests and the many clergy brought in from foreign countries.

"This is going to be a great experience," he said.

While the association is creating a Web site, further information is available by emailing: info4@uscatholicpriests.us

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Source URL (retrieved on *11/22/2014 - 04:48*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/us-priests-form-new-national-association