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

Fledgling national priests' group to tackle broad agenda

Dan Morris-Young | Jun. 6, 2013
Seattle

Reinstating general absolution in the United States, consultation in the selection process for bishops, studying the ordination of women and married men, and collegial exercise of church authority are among topics of 15 resolutions on the agenda of the second annual assembly of the fledgling Association of U.S. Catholic Priests [1] June 24-27.

To be held at Seattle University, the gathering's theme -- "*Lumen Gentium*: God's Pilgrim People" -- is based on the Second Vatican Council's 1964 document, also known as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

The association was formed following an Aug. 25, 2011, meeting of 27 self-described "Vatican II priests" from 15 dioceses and 11 states at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, notes the group's website [1].

The organization's inaugural assembly in June 2012 drew 240 delegates from 55 dioceses to St. Leo University northeast of Tampa, Fla. Among its actions was approval of a letter of support to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. LCWR remains under controversial Vatican control and directives for reform.

The association's board chair, Fr. Dave Cooper, said about the same number of attendees are expected at the Seattle conference.

Membership has climbed to 950, representing more than 120 U.S. dioceses, said Cooper, pastor of St. Matthias Parish in Milwaukee and chair of the independent Milwaukee Archdiocese Priests Alliance.

Five keynote addresses will be scattered over the three-day Seattle conference. Fr. Patrick Brennan, director of development at Mayslake Ministries in Lombard, Ill., as well as director of the National Center for Evangelization and Parish Renewal in Chicago, will provide "a pastor's perspective" on *Lumen Gentium*, according to the event's program.

Catherine Clifford will offer a theological reflection. She is founding director of the Research Centre on Vatican II and 21st Century Catholicism at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, where she is also a professor of systematic and historical theology and vice dean of the theological faculty.

A professor of church law and dean emeritus at the Washington Theological Union, Fr. James Coriden will speak to the theme from a canon law framework. (Washington Theological Union has announced it will cease operation this year.)

Two journalists -- Robert Blair Kaiser, who covered the Second Vatican Council for *TIME* magazine, and Robert Mickens, Vatican correspondent for *The Tablet* based in London -- will offer differing time vantages on *Lumen Gentium* and Vatican II.

The assembly will address the slate of 15 resolutions during its business sessions, Cooper told *NCR*. He added that a prioritizing effort was underway and it was possible that not all 15 could be considered at the Seattle meeting.

In addition to study of the expansion of ordination, a call for general absolution reinstatement, and an appeal for transparency and local consultation on the selection of bishops, the resolutions also:

- Call for the exercise of church authority to be carried out "in a collegial manner," employing "a consensus decision making process."
- Direct the association to "ask the Holy Father to grant permission to use the 1974 edition of the Sacramentary in the United States where desired."
- Ask the association to support "a comprehensive plan for evangelization in the U.S.A.," including "diagnosis" of reasons Catholics have left the church and study of Christian churches that have seen rapid growth.
- Request that the organization invite the U.S. bishops' conference to appoint a liaison to the association.
- Call for the Seattle meeting's assembly to "decry the annual collection for the Archdiocese for Military Service for its rendering to Caesar what is to be rendered to God."

Asked how he might respond to those who would say the 15 resolutions sound like a party platform for the progressive wing of the Catholic church, Cooper said, "Well, that's what Vatican Council II embraced."

He said the organization is "growing slowly" and that "many priests do not know we even exist."

Confirming that the average age of members is about 70, Cooper said there has been resistance from younger, more recently ordained priests, some of whom "see us as disloyal if not downright dissenting."

Alluding to recent studies that have pointed to differing views of church and authority between older and younger generations of Catholic clergy, Cooper described "Vatican II priests" as viewing the priesthood in terms of "service, of washing the feet of others" in contrast to clerics who hold a "priest as ruler" model.

Cooper said the association is working hard to "build bridges" and to "hold hands with the laity and at the same time with the bishops."

"Sometimes it makes you feel like you are on the rack, being torn part," he said, adding that the association is "of, by and for priests." Its core work is "keeping alive the vision of the Second Vatican Council" and "offering support to our brother priests," he said.

Cooper said the association's first order of business was "writing a snail mail letter to every ordinary in the U.S. explaining who we are and what we are doing and our mission statement. We offered our respect and pledged cooperation."

"We received cordial responses from some bishops, form-letter responses from others, and no response at all from the majority," he said.

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Source URL (retrieved on *12/13/2013 - 06:15*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/fledgling-national-priests-group-tackle-broad-agenda

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[1] http://www.uscatholicpriests.org/
[2] mailto:dmyoung@ncronline.org