

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Reflections on the Detroit Conference

PART II: JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH

We live in a changing world. But the roots of the church in this country spring from a people who were willing to face change and build the future. The forebears of today's Catholics came from all countries and continents of the old world and the new. With incredible courage and considerable imagination they built churches in a new world. It was this interplay of values and concerns that these people brought with them to this country, along with their willingness to adapt to their new country, which made American Catholicism such a vital faith. In the same way, our generation in the church must be faithful to the values that come to us as gifts from the past and have the imagination to build a renewed church for the future. To preserve the faith and reach out to the people of today requires the same courage, imagination, cooperation and intelligent, decisive action which our ancestors showed in establishing and building the American churches of the past.

Change is not always a blessing. The ambiguity of change became evident after Vatican II in the declining vitality of many parishes, the shifting patterns of social action, the surprising appearance of unfamiliar but exciting movements of religious enthusiasm, and the no less surprising but far more worrisome decline of Catholic schools.

At Detroit, suggestions for change came on the table. They were surprising but each of them had been heard before. An institution will run into a maze of shocks and upset if it refuses to let suggestions that are everywhere come forth within the internal processes of that institution. It is for this reason that the Detroit meeting was planned and held by the Bishops. At the same time, with a wisdom acquired over the past ten years of rapid change, we know that suggestions must be weighed and tested, seriously discussed, prayed over, and only then decisive action is in order. What I hear the work at Detroit saying to us as a church is this — Listen! These suggestions come from those who are in love with the church and concerned for her ability to bring life and grace to people in our country. Listen and consider! These suggestions may be born in the Spirit who does not always conform to our ways of thinking. Discern! Choose as church. Take the risk and decide what should become our practice and what should be tested further. Dialogue openly with us. Detroit is a substantive and weighty call to action, mature and thoughtful action, for your bishops and for the American Catholic Church.

Results of the questionnaires: The following suggestions received 15,000 votes or more.

1. Religious education of adults — provide continuing education opportunities — 33,162.
2. Church understood as community — promote ways of developing community — 20,544.
3. Communications within the church — devise ways of effective communication of church teaching — 19,012.
4. Communications within the church — promote ongoing dialogue, bishops, priests, and people — 18,352.
5. Use of church resources — share resources and facilities with the poor — 17,566.
6. Women's role in church should be expanded — 16,047.
7. Women in the church — church should support equal opportunity for women in society — 16,266.
8. Priests — should give more effective homilies — 15,684.

The recommendations on the Church began with a healthy sense of humility with the first areas called "Justice in the Church." There was little evidence in Detroit of the self-righteous sureness of the religiously inspired "answer" to the world's problems. Rather, the document on the church begins by focusing attention on an

internal application of the teachings on social justice and human rights. The first recommendation addresses financial policies, personnel distribution, the use of financial resources. It further calls for equitable pay for all personnel working for the church, a full benefits program, and the right of employees to collective bargaining. A painful beginning point, painful and costly, but the People of God are called to "adequate" stewardship. Perhaps this is a somewhat worldly place to begin but, as bishop of the diocese, I find it most realistic. I also find some encouragement to continue with personnel policies that I have been struggling to implement. These items are not easily accomplished and seem costly but it does give me added sympathy for both employers and employees.

Attention is called to due process within the church. There was a strong call for an end to geographic morality in regard to marriage tribunals. In some dioceses dispensations will be granted in regard to second marriages, while in others there is a great reticence to do so. It is a question of sophisticated church law, but the document is on target in asking for national standards of fairness. Much in the manner of our local nursing home standards of religious care, the Catholic laity does have the right to expect equal service and justice from the church no matter where they happen to live.

The conference asked that "in addition to their accountability to norms of law and orthodoxy, fidelity to an open consultative process should be a chief factor in accountability of church leaders." I do not know whether I or your pastors could stand before that chief factor, but in this diocese I believe that all of us are trying to understand and live that kind of fidelity. It was good to hear it called for clearly.

In light of the historical pluralism of the Catholic Church, there was a call to ending all forms of discrimination whether by design or by accident. Only on the level of policy can this be accomplished. I do not think there will be a move toward quotas within the church but we should have staffing that reflects our people and open lines of recruitment for all staffing efforts.

Two recommendations called for a continued high attention to the preparation of the members of parish staffs. Formerly, that meant we had to worry about the seminary. Now it indicates that there must be training available for pastoral assistants, deacons, religious education coordinators and others. We all need to stretch our minds to figure out how best this can be done.

A section was added from the floor on the final day calling for all members of the church to earnestly and prayerfully work to foster vocations to the priesthood. A notion of the priesthood that would be simply functional was rejected in this motion and great attention was called to the role of spiritual leadership and pastoral care.

I want to stop here and ask you to reread the former sections. Do they seem to be the work of a fringe? Do they seem to be made by people who are not in touch with the mainstream of the church? They seem to me eminently pastoral and beautiful in the alert and personal tone they bring to current discussions.

Finally, in this first section there was strong statement of concern about the possibility of ordaining married persons, women, and allowing those who have left the priesthood because of marriage to resume their lives as priests. Always the language was full of care for persons and, at the same time, fully aware of the study, discussion and prayer that would be involved in such a step. Detroit insisted that the question be faced openly and discussed in a reasoned and careful way. There was little push for an instant solution. But there was a clear statement that these questions must be dealt with seriously and responsibly. The people present at Detroit were strongly in favor of all three steps.

The second section of the recommendations dealt with Women in the Church. The statements in this area are remarkably gentle in tone, lucid, and in my opinion, filled with merit. Let me quote the introductory paragraphs to this section:

"Vatican Council II has called the church to a renewed sense of mission to the world, to its self-understanding of a people bearing responsibility for justice.

The grave problems of the world challenge the church to remove inherited structures which prevent full participation of its members in ministry and, thus, to empower all of them for service according to their gifts and calls."

Traditional church life and practice have especially limited the freedom of women to share responsibility and ministry. The Church in the Modern World #29 called for "elimination of discrimination based on sex." The recommendations speak of a structure on the national level to design ways of insuring the full participation of women in the life and ministry of the church. It called for a process to construct a more "fully developed" position on the ordination of women to sacred orders. This should be a complete process attentive to the needs of the church, the action of the Holy Spirit, the human sciences, biblical insights and a theology which includes recent pontifical and episcopal statements. I am impressed with the reverence for the church and for careful study which is contained in such a motion. I am concerned with many attitudes that I encounter in regard to the role of women in the church. I would ask all of you as your bishop to carefully rethink, listen for truth, and help us make a decision on this matter. Do not eliminate the genuineness of this question by attributing it to a group of "libbers" or some other such derogatory term. This question arose overwhelmingly from the hearts of the people at Detroit.

The third section on the church dealt with Education. Again, the pastoral but sharp and realistic tone is blended. This, I think, might be one of the results of documents that are produced by lay people, Sisters, priests and bishops working together. In keeping with the input to the Detroit Conference, this section begins with a statement of adult formation, "That, within the context . . . of the parish, very high priority be given adult formation appropriate to the needs and concerns of the total church . . . respecting the principles of adult learning." Well said, I think, and much needed also. Secondly, there was a call to respect the responsibility of parents in program planning, implementation, and discerning the time when their children are ready to receive the sacraments. This was further strengthened by a call to the diocesan level to plan education which will meet the needs of all with special attention to such groups as the handicapped, young adults and migrants. Each of those groups has a special ring in our diocese for each of them is present, and there are many talented people ready to help.

There was a section that called for evaluation of all our present efforts in relation to the cost of each method that is used. Finally, there was a ringing call to action in regard to Catholic schools. This did not receive much press, but the language of this section was powerful. Catholic schools should be supported where possible, especially when the local community is too poor to support such schools. The local church, acting through diocesan and parish councils and school boards, should determine priorities for the schools in their areas and "exercise full responsibility for their continuation and management." There was a call to "found a national organization representative of non-discriminative Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and non-denominational private schools and of parents with children in such schools to work through the democratic process to provide tax funds to parents, especially poor parents, to exercise their right of freedom of choice." The parents' right to choose was the hallmark of a call for State and Federal legislation enabling the just distribution of tax monies.

This section closed with recommendations regarding the religious education programs of those not in Catholic schools (71%), integration in public and Catholic schools, multilingual and multicultural values in the educational systems, courses to improve homilies of priests.

A panorama of suggestions and a challenge to all who care about the church was issued in Detroit. I find them very stimulating and recommend them highly to the Diocese of Rochester, not for mindless implementation but for careful consideration. Next week I hope to comment on possible methods of absorbing what happened at Detroit. It was a moment of light, but illumination of the parishes and People of God in our twelve counties can only come if we choose to examine the source.