

World & Nation

Priests' federation to ask pope for 'optional celibacy'

By Roy Horner and Paul Dunker
 Louisville, Ky. (NC) — The permanent diaconate should be open to women, priestly celibacy should be optional and "reconciliation and restoration" should be sought for resigned, married priests, according to resolutions approved last week by representatives of U.S. priests' councils.

The resolutions were approved during the 20th-annual convention of the National Federation of Priests' Councils April 25-29 in Louisville. More than 250 priests attended the convention.

The resolutions on laicized priests and women deacons passed with little discussion, while the motion on optional celibacy generated 30 minutes of debate before being amended and adopted.

The voting delegates asked the federation to "make a formal request of the Holy Father that the discipline of obligatory perpetual celibacy no longer be required."

Several of the delegates who spoke against the motion said it is a request that the pope will not grant.

"The call for optional celibacy is not part of the solution, it is part of the problem," said Father Ronald Simeone of the Diocese of Providence, R.I. "It is contrary to the discipline of the Church. No one has demonstrated that we would be better off with married clergy."

Father John O'Connor of the Archdiocese of San Francisco said he would not have chosen celibacy had it been optional. He discovered "the beauty of celibacy only by trying to live it in my own life."

"I think it would be premature for us to go in this direction to solve the problem of the shortage of priests," he told fellow delegates. The shortage may be "a gift from the Spirit because lay people are getting more involved" in the Church.

In the convention's opening address, Father Richard McBrien, professor of theology

at the University of Notre Dame, said "one does not become a priest to become a priest. One becomes a priest to be of service to the needs of the community."

Priesthood, he said, "is not a state in life. It is not a running start on salvation."

The Second Vatican Council, in recognizing the ministerial responsibilities of all baptized people, gave priests a new understanding of their ministry, Father McBrien said.

"The priestly ministry since Vatican II has been more of a collaborative ministry working in concert with other ministers, men and women alike, in the same community of faith," he said.

Collaboration is essential because a priest "isn't qualified to do everything, even if he wanted to and had the time and energy," Father McBrien said.

The necessity of working as a team with lay people and religious can cause tension, said Father Frank J. McNulty, the New Jersey pastor who addressed Pope John Paul II during the September 1987 papal meeting in Miami with U.S. priests.

"We are all so different," he said. "When we come together to do ministry, we have a lot to work out."

Priests are "desperate for help" in facing the demands of celibacy, Father McNulty said. "Virtually every study mentions celibacy as a major reason for priests leaving the Church. And it's a major reason for the loneliness of those who stay."

Another tension that priests must deal with is disillusionment, he said. Instead of being able to devote their time to serving people and serving God, pastors get bogged down with the "lights, locks, leaks, lawns and ledgers."

While many in the Church are continuing the renewal begun by the Second Vatican Council, he said, others are intent on bringing about a "restoration" of the



Roy Horner/NC News
 Father Robert Ray of St. Margaret Mary Church, Louisville, Ky., sprinkles holy water on the audience attending the opening liturgy at the National Federation of Priests' Councils meeting April 25-29 in Louisville. About 400 priests, religious and lay people attended the event.

pre-Vatican II Church.

"Rubrics-vigilante committees, parishioners eager to report whatever father did wrong at Mass today" are a great source of stress, Father McNulty said.

During the convention, Father McNulty, pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Roseland, N.J., also received the federation's President's Award.

Joseph Holland, executive director of the Pallottine Institute for Lay Leadership and Apostolate Research, told the priests that ordination should be reserved for "leaders of

the Christian community, not mere facilitators."

"We need to ordain priests who are already aware of and sure of their own creativity," he said. "They will in turn serve as midwives to the birthing of creativity in others."

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