

NCCB report is remarkable document

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

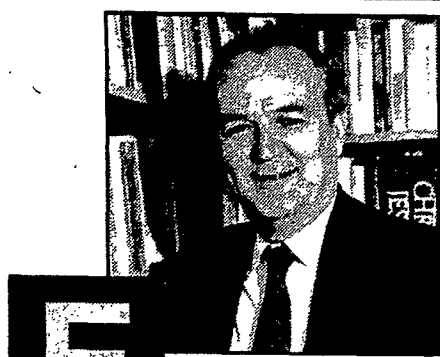
The National Conference of Catholic Bishops is in the process of reorganizing the way it does the U.S. church's business. This has occasioned one of the most important documents in the entire postconciliar history of the church in the United States: a remarkably frank report submitted to the committee on reorganization by a small group of bishops with the support of many of their colleagues.

The document, published earlier in the *National Catholic Reporter*, states openly what many active laity, sisters, priests, brothers, and bishops have been saying among themselves for the better part of the past 15 years or more. Three items follow:

First, the U.S. hierarchy does not publicly address, as a body, "the thoughts and feelings one hears privately among the bishops themselves, and among the priests and other leadership people in our dioceses." Instead, many of the bishops leave the conference meetings "with a feeling that (they) haven't been talking about the same 'Church' (they) experience back home, and haven't dealt with many of the pressing and important matters that face (them)."

If it is not because the bishops are "afraid" to do such things, perhaps, this report suggests, it is because the issues "often involve disagreement with the approach taken by curial offices."

In other words, the bishops find



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themselves caught in the middle, between their sense of responsibility toward their own dioceses and toward the church in America, on the one hand, and their role as members of the college of bishops for the universal church, on the other. They have tended, in almost all cases, to resolve the dilemma in favor of the Vatican.

The bishops' report cites several examples:

Their document on "The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop" was sent to Rome for approval before it was even presented to the conference.

The outcome of the proposed pastoral letter on women in the church was significantly influenced by a letter that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had written to the drafting committee. The

rest of the conference was not informed of that letter, nor has ever seen it. The same happened in the case of the bishops' document on nutrition and dehydration.

The English translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church was taken completely out of the U.S. and other English-speaking bishops' hands, having been "intercepted" by a small group (including Mother Angelica) which succeeded in reintroducing sexist language.

The Directory of Priests was sent out by the Congregation of the Clergy without any input from the NCCB.

The document on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, was issued by the Vatican without consultation with the conference.

The apostolic letter on women's ordination was also issued without prior consultation with the bishops, even though the bishops are the ones who have had to face the pastoral fallout from the letter.

Second, "all is not well" with the church in the United States. "Parishes and dioceses find diminishing numbers at Sunday Eucharist, and disaffection among youth, women, Hispanics. Catholic bishops experience a credibility problem with many faithful people. There are vast numbers of 'Sunday only' Catholics or, worse, Catholics in name only. We have succeeded in instructing Catholics in the basic truths, laws and practices of the Church, but not in handing on our relationship in faith to a loving God."

Later in the document, the bishops mention other signs of malaise: the priest shortage, the declining quality of candidates for the priesthood and rumors of a high percentage of homosexual men in seminaries and the priesthood, sexual misconduct in the priesthood, the declining morale of priests, the burdens of school funding, mediocre-to-poor preaching, problems with the quality of liturgical celebration, the marginalization of the poor, the public face of the church on abortion, the annulment process, and on-going conflict over contraception and sexual ethics generally.

Third, there is a determined and concentrated effort on the part of many well-placed church members "to present the minority positions at the (Second Vatican) Council as the true meaning of the Council."

The bishops offer two indications of this effort. First, the strong emphasis being placed on "the bonds between individual bishops and the pope, and (the) deemphasizing (of) the collegiality of national conferences."

And second, the development of the College of Cardinals as "a supra-collegial body" at the expense of the rightful role of the bishops' conferences in the governance of the universal and national churches.

"Restructuring the Conference and its procedures will be to no purpose," the bishops conclude, "if bishops are unable to speak honestly with one another."

And with the rest of the church.

Have you taken a priest to lunch lately?

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

The story was all too familiar. "Did you hear about 'Fr. So-and-So'?" They announced in church on Sunday that he's left the parish for an extended leave ..."

No, I hadn't heard, but it didn't really surprise me. 'Fr. So-and-So' is one of the best priests I know. He works extremely hard, takes his responsibilities very seriously, and empathizes with anyone who comes to him for help. With the current shortage of priests, he's become even more overworked than before. In fact, in retrospect he was an obvious candidate for burnout or breakdown.

What bothered me more than anything was this question: Did my fellow laypeople and I do enough to support 'Fr. So-and-So'? Did we tell him loudly and clearly and often how much we ap-



FAITH AND WORK

preciated all he did for us: the faithful and meaningful way he celebrated the Mass and presided over the sacraments; the better-than-average homi-

lies he gave most of the time; the way he noticed our children and made each one feel special in some small way; his presence at our celebrations of marriage and birth, as well as his sharing of our anxiety and sadness at sickness and death?

Did we let him know that we respected and admired his vow of celibacy (even those of us who feel that it is no longer a wise requirement for the church to impose on all priests)?

Did we thank him for choosing a life of service (even those of us who believe that women should also be allowed to be priests)?

Or did we complain to him about the church's rigidity and insensitivity, as if he disagreed with us or could do anything about it. Did we expect him to do all the worrying and make all the decisions and enforce all the rules for the parish?

Did we begrudge him his vacation,

or golf game, or new car, or trip to Rome? Did we hold him to a higher standard as a follower of Christ than we are willing to hold ourselves?

Most of all, did we invite him into our lives and homes? Did we take him along on that family trip to the zoo? Did we think of him when we had that extra ticket to the ball game? Were we sure that he had someplace to go on the holidays, someone to be with when he was low or depressed, someone with whom to share his dreams and joys and successes?

My guess is that most of us did not do enough for 'Fr. So-and-So.' He was a "good enough" priest, but maybe we didn't tell him that. And now it may be too late.

So let's each take a priest to lunch and thank him for the good work he's doing. If he asks why, tell him its because we never got a chance to thank 'Fr. So-and-So.'

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