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Call to Action

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Vitale said.

Vitale remarked that he doesn't understand how Call to Action members can legitimately call themselves Catholic and simultaneously oppose the pope.

"Either they're listening to the Holy Father or not. And if you're not, then you can't be a Catholic," Vitale said.

Father Ronald Harley countered that critics of Call to Action don't accept the notion that as society changes, Catholics must also move forward instead of backward.

"You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube," said Father Harley, pastor at St. Francis de Sales Church in Geneva.

Father Harley, who attended November's Call to Action conference, cited the priest shortage as an issue that cries for change in Vatican policy.

"We need to expand our understanding of priesthood and ordained ministry, to make it a gender-neutral issue," he said.

Father Edward Palumbos — who also traveled to Detroit — said he has supported Call to Action from its beginning, when he saw a 1976 newspaper headline: "Catholics Call for Married Clergy."

"I was on a Marriage Encounter weekend. It was kind of ironic," said Father Palumbos, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece.

Father Palumbos maintained that advocacy for married clergy is not radical, pointing out that celibacy was not required of priests in the early centuries of the Catholic Church.

A reexamination of sexuality was among the issues at the inaugural 1976 Call to Action conference held in Detroit. Sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, this conference laid the groundwork for the current Call to Action organization formed in 1978.

However, the U.S. bishops as a group did not continue to support the sweeping reform proposals that emerged from the 1976 conference. As a result, the Call to Action movement was largely limited to the Chicago area until 1990, when the group took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* reiterating its call for church reform. The ad was signed by 4,500 Catholics.

From there, regional Call to Action chapters began to emerge across the country. A national Call to Action conference was staged in 1993 and drew 2,800 people; the conference was held annually in Chicago until it moved to Detroit this past November.

Kayo Hull, a parishioner at St. Michael's Church in Penn Yan, suggested that the Vatican has been quietly involved in suppressing Call to Action's growth over the last 20 years.

"The impression I get is that the recommendations of 1976 were permanently buried — and purposely buried," said Hull, who attended the Detroit conference along with Father Peter Deckman, St. Michael's co-pastor. "In 1976 the doors were opened. Somebody came around and shut them."

A spokesperson for the United States Catholic Conference disagreed, saying that the Call to Action group formed in 1978 does not fully represent the U.S. bishops' sentiment that led to the 1976 conference.

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, RSM, said that many strides have been made on objectives raised at the 1976 conference in such areas as poverty, racial equality, and peace and justice.

"At the time, those were very controversial issues," Sister Walsh said.

On the other hand, Sister Walsh said the current Call to Action agenda targets disagreements with papal decisions — "internal" matters, she said, as opposed to "external" issues.

Pieczynski agreed that U.S. bishops have displayed little public backing of Call to Ac-

tion in recent years. She noted that only one current head bishop of any diocese — Bishop Raymond Lucker of New Ulm, Minn. — was present in Detroit in November.

"There's a lot of fear out there," Pieczynski contended.

Similar tension among Nebraska Catholics struck a raw nerve nationally last year. According to Msgr. Timothy Thornburn, chancellor of the Lincoln diocese, Bishop Bruskewitz's edict was in response to a Call to Action group that celebrated a Mass without using rites and creeds of the Roman Catholic liturgy.

Msgr. Thornburn added that such groups as the Freemasons and Catholics for a Free Choice were also targeted in Bishop Bruskewitz's announcement. These groups, according to Msgr. Thornburn, were to be excommunicated if they did not cease their activity by May 15.

Currently, he said, Call to Action membership in the Lincoln diocese ranges from 20 to 30 people who meet in participants' homes. He said that some members "proudly say they were excommunicated."

He added that those who are excommunicated would be welcomed back into the church if they ceased involvement with Call to Action and received the sacrament of penance.

Msgr. Thornburn said he was "very much surprised" by the national media attention, but he has been pleased with the feedback.

Yet Pieczynski stated that she, also, has benefited from the publicity. She said the flap has caused membership to rise by 5,000 people in the last year to a total of 18,000 registered members.

James Likoudis, former president of Catholics United for the Faith, supported Bishop Bruskewitz's action.

"He has the responsibility to straighten out crooked thinking," remarked Likoudis, of Montour Falls in Schuyler County.

Call to Action supporters, Likoudis

charged, have reached "a theological dead end with nowhere else to go except out of the church." He said that priests who support Call to Action are men who "place themselves in spiritual jeopardy" and "would pose a problem for the bishop."

Bishop Clark stated that he cannot endorse any proposal that directly opposes Vatican rulings.

"I have a serious responsibility to articulate the position by the Holy Father. I stand with him on that judgment," Bishop Clark said.

Yet the bishop does not believe that Call to Action members should be labeled as dissidents. He also disagrees sharply with some dioceses' policies that discourage Call to Action activities.

"In my opinion, in this era of the church, if we are going to sin we should sin on the side of inclusiveness and dialogue, and search for concern and deeper understanding — rather than sin on the side of exclusiveness and the premature termination of conversation," Bishop Clark stated.

On the other hand, Vitale charged that Call to Action members put their personal agendas ahead of church teachings.

"There's a difference between what I think, feel and want and what *Christ* wants," Vitale remarked.

Vitale said he hopes Call to Action members will attend the next Call to Holiness conference.

"We welcome Call to Action people, so they can hear what they forgot — or never learned," Vitale said.

Despite sharply differing philosophies, Pieczynski is hopeful that the opposing sides can someday achieve mutual understanding. She pondered what Jesus would do if he were to return to earth and visit both Detroit conferences.

"Maybe he'd yell at both of us, saying, 'Why are you so caught up in the rules? I said to go feed my lambs, feed my sheep,'" she remarked.

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