The changes in the Catholic Church between the convening of the
Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s and the present time
constitute one of the most fascinating fields for research in the
sociology of religion and the sociology of organization ever made
available to social researchers. An organization that seemed immut-
able suddenly, or so it seemed, went through dramatic and then
traumatic change—perhaps the most dramatic change to have
affected it in more than one thousand years. As a result of the
change, or so it seemed, there were massive resignations from the
priesthood and religious life and notable declines (in the United
States, at any rate) on most measures of religious behavior. (Al-
though recent research has suggested that as far as the laity are
concerned at least, the conciliar changes were extremely successful
and that other events, most notably the issuance of the birth control
encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, account for the decline in devotional
practices.)

Professor Stewart has chosen one aspect of the change for his
examination under the scholar’s microscope, the emergence of a
professional association, perhaps even a union, of Roman Catholic
priests. It is one of the merits of his work that he is able to combine
sympathy with discretion and objectivity. One does not have to read
very far into the volume to tell that Professor Stewart is reporting
from the inside, that he is a committed ‘postconciliar’ Roman
Catholic, and that his own personal religious and social positions are
quite close to those held by those who have emerged as the ruling
elite of the National Federation of Priests’ Councils. But he is still
able to maintain the strict objectivity of the professional social
scientist in reporting the ambiguities, the mistakes, the frustrations,
and the uncertainties that faced and still face the NFPC. I suspect
that the NFPC leadership will be pleased by many parts of this
volume; they will also find many parts make painful reading.

Professor Stewart closes on a somewhat hopeful note. He seems
to be reasonably optimistic about the future of the NFPC. I would be inclined to be more reserved, perhaps because I have little faith in the NFPC leadership. I quit the Chicago constituent group when Patrick O’Malley, then president of the NFPC, demanded that I turn over the data from the NORC priesthood study to a sociologist he would designate on the grounds that I was studying the priesthood ‘from the bishops’ viewpoint’ and he wanted someone to study it from the priests’ viewpoint. When I failed to accede to his ultimatum, Father O’Malley commissioned another study, apparently to ‘refute’ ours. One doesn’t pay due to those who question your honesty and integrity.

The NFPC, in my judgment, reflects some of the fundamental problems of the presbyterate that it is attempting to represent organizationally: it has little respect for and little understanding of professional scholarly competence, and it is permeated by the envy of mediocre men for those who dare to step too far beyond the boundaries of the established clerical culture. Certainly the NFPC is more politically and socially progressive than the presbyterate it represents, but one can expect the NFPC to go beyond envy and mediocrity only when the presbyterate moves beyond it. My hunch is that such a movement will take place not because of what takes place within the priesthood but because of the reform of the American church on high that is currently being accomplished by the transformation of the American hierarchy under the leadership of the present apostolic delegate Jean Jadot. Ironically, the priesthood will be transformed not because of its own professional organization but because of a Rome-appointed apostolic delegate and the new bishops he has brought to church leadership.

I imagine that Professor Stewart will find this judgment of the NFPC made from inside the presbyterate somewhat at odds with his own much more sympathetic judgment made from the outside. However, I do not think there is a basic disharmony between the two. As a priest, I guess I expected far more of the NFPC than they were able to produce; perhaps, as a lay person, Professor Stewart expected far less. Fair enough.

It must be said in all fairness to the NFPC that in some respects it reflects the strength and assets of the American presbyterate. It has been flexible, pragmatic (at least relatively so), and ingenious in
I doubt that priests in many other countries could organize so well and so effectively. Perhaps the most serious organizational blows to the NFPC have been the resignations from the priesthood of some of its top leadership. These have been serious blows to the organization’s credibility it is much to be feared.

I am surprised that as a layman Professor Stewart is not more concerned about the NFPC’s failure to face seriously some of the most important ministerial problems that the laity encounter in their experience with the clergy. Surely the most powerful dissatisfaction among the laity with clerical performance has to do with the quality of preaching. And yet the NFPC has made little if any effort to improve the professional performance of the presbyterate in this area. I have the impression that so much of their time was spent trying to dialogue with bishops on the rights of priests vis-à-vis the hierarchy that there was little time left to dialogue with the rank and file laity on the subject of their rights vis-à-vis the clergy—especially the right to hear a decent Sunday sermon.

Again, my difference with Professor Stewart is probably one of a matter of emphasis. He is pleased with the professional association of priests that came into existence in a short period of time, consolidated its existence, and began to build toward the future; I am dissatisfied because the organization has not turned its attention to preaching. I must say in all candor that Professor Stewart’s expectations are more reasonable than mine and better represent the realistic expectations of a social scientist. He has advanced our understanding of the American priesthood and the Catholic Church in transition. He appears to be more hopeful about the prospects of the NFPC’s future than I am. I hope he is right.