In 1968 the National Federation of Priests’ Councils was born in travail. This was the time when the U.S. Catholic Church was experiencing a malaise and turmoil which stemmed from the shock waves of Vatican II as well as the cultural and social upheaval during the 1960s. The NFPC began without sanction of the Catholic bishops.

To launch an autonomous national federation of organized groups of priests was a radically new idea. It was also a sociological miracle in that the more moderate senates of 1968 were willing to join liberal free associations of priests in constituting a social movement of priests.

Besides being a new idea and a social miracle, it was deviant and illegitimate. The initial agenda for change, dealing first of all with the problem of priests’ ‘interests’ issues and secondly with ‘value’ issues found in the pastoral and social ministry, forced the federation into controversy. Many if not most of the bishops judged it as an enemy’s camp threatening their authority and official prerogatives. During its first four years of existence, it was indeed a thorn in the side of the NCCB.

Beginning in 1973 and by 1977, however, the NFPC and the bishops were at least cooperating with each other on an unofficial level. But formal recognition of the NFPC has yet to come. ‘Interest’ issues and confrontation tactics had crested with the ‘Moment of Truth’ statement and by the 1972 convention in Denver, the federation began shifting gears moving away from priests’ rights and personnel issues to the concerns of spiritual and social ministries.

This policy has continued, under the leadership of Presidents Mayo and Ratigan, to the present time. The motif has been ‘Serving the Ministering Church’. Convention themes and agendas for action have highlighted different dimensions of this theme. At Detroit in 1973, the focus was ‘Pastoral Accountability’. At St. Petersburg, the theme was ‘Reconciliation: Risks and Possibilities’. Last year at
Houston, it was 'Serving the Ministering Church'. This theme will be continued at the Louisville convention, 1977, which celebrates its tenth anniversary.

The federation has been at the cutting edge of the significant ecclesial and societal issues over the past decade. It provided a forum where all segments of society within and without the Church were heard and debated.

But the federation has never had the organizational resources and adequate structures to be truly effective with the rank and file priests. It has never been representative of the local clergy. Despite these defects, and for whatever reasons which produced them, the federation has opened the doors of archbishops and associate pastors alike. A policy, together with a variety of programs, has been institutionalized to insure that the opportunity for dialogue is ever present. Priests have the right to voice their ideas and concerns, their hurts and experiences. The NFPC is the only forum left for parish priests which provides the opportunity for such participation.

In launching well-nurtured activities into separate national organizations, such as continuing education, the rural ministry program, personnel administration, etc., the NFPC has kept its organization slim. This has allowed it to concentrate on its role of reconciler and facilitator, sharing and exchanging the ponderings of ministries of other priests and people.

The dialogues with the pastoral ministries have been on reconciling the issues of pro life, divorced Catholics, resigned priests, alienated youth, and ideological cleavages. The concerns of the social ministry have focused on racial inequality, women’s rights, justice for the poor, world hunger, and corporate responsibility among others.

A great deal of the federation’s activity as facilitator in the ministering church culminated in an event unique in U.S. Catholic history. It was an event in which members of the NFPC, past and present, at various levels, participated with religious and lay groups in a two year process which led to the ‘Bicentennial Conference on Liberty and Justice for All’. The conference, however, was convened by the United States Catholic bishops, and this is what made the event significant.

The ‘Call to Action’ conference held in October of 1976 voiced
demands which startled many bishops, especially since the NCCB hailed the conference as the most representative meeting in U.S. Catholic history. Furthermore, over 1100 of the 1340 official delegates were approved by their bishops.

And what were the demands of the people of God? They wanted changes. They wanted ordination of women, married priests, remarried divorced Catholics to be received back into the church, the norms of birth control to be determined by individual conscience, civil rights for homosexuals, establishment of a National Review Board to promote accountability at all levels of church government, broader participation in the selection of bishops, and to transform diocesan councils to policy making bodies. These resolutions coming from a broad representation of the Church reminds one of similar resolutions passed by the NFPC a decade ago. In the pages of this book, I call this first set of demands ‘interest’ issues dealing with the rights of God’s people.

I also discuss in these pages another set of NFPC resolutions which are described as ‘value’ issues of the commonweal. The NCCB’s Bicentennial Conference also addressed itself to these issues of social justice: racial equality, family stability, respect for ethnicity, disarmament, sexual equality, poverty and hunger, and other concerns of the social and pastoral ministry. These latter issues, as mentioned above, have been NFPC’s primary agenda over the past five years. Although an interesting question might be how much influence the NFPC has had on this conference and its preparation, it is not as relevant as the question of what lies ahead for the future.

The NFPC has retooled and realigned its national committees and their responsibilities this past year. But whether the NFPC has the organizational resources and effective networks of communication, and whether its grassroots support, morale and commitment to the federation is strong enough to engage and challenge the NCCB to implement the resolutions adopted by their people are salient questions.

Answers, solutions, implementations, will be hard to come by regardless of any type and intensity of activity and even conflict. The NCCB is a non-binding structure with a greater part of its membership unable to fit participatory democracy into their ecclesiology.
Sociologically and theologically, it doesn’t have the capability to implement. Its strength, in holding the line on change, lies in its organizational weakness. If, however, these matters are placed in a different context, then perhaps there is room for movement.

If this Detroit conference is viewed as providing directions, offering an opportunity to dialogue, and a process of accommodation in give and take exchanges, then the challenge and opportunity remain.

Which direction the federation will take is not answered in this book. This essay is mainly about its development over the past ten years, its mistakes and victories, its organizational development and vulnerability, its leadership and an uneven membership. It is about a cadre of brave priests and the rank and file of priests uninterested in the NFPC. In short, it is about a decade of turmoil.

In March, 1977, the NFPC celebrated its tenth birthday. As it moves into its second decade, will it take up again in significant ways the ‘interest’ issues mentioned above? Or will the federation continue to emphasize the value issues found in the pastoral and social ministry? Those answers are not to be found here. One may find, however, in this historical and sociological analysis of the past ten years, some clues which may help the NFPC to adequately prepare itself to decide which option it will emphasize and what policies it will pursue.

Ten years ago, democracy came knocking at the door of the Church. The NFPC let it in and the total Church hasn’t been the same ever since. The 1968 delegates heard the militant voice of Joe O’Donaghue calling for massive involvement in the peace movement. The 1974 delegates heard the quiet voice of Cesar Chavez asking for the NFPC’s support. Last year, they heard the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Jardot’s brotherly exhortation to unity which is born from the exchanges of diverse views. If nothing else, the NFPC has provided priests with a forum to debate, a democracy, a voice. This option is precious. So whatever direction the federation decides to move, I wish it well on this tenth anniversary for it is a reason to hope.

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