Beginnings of the Federation

The Vatican Council called for impossible things. Pope John XXIII issued a mandate for renewal and change. Along with this mandate, Pope Paul VI called for unity and peace. But, within a few years, turmoil replaced peace and a division between traditionalists and progressives fractured the unity of the Roman Catholic Church.

Modernization of the Church called for the abolishment of authoritarianism and institutionalized legalisms. The frustration and discontent with the pace of renewal was primarily felt by the middle leadership of the Church. It was priests and religious who were at the forefront of rebellion. Documents of Vatican II, such as *Christus Dominus* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, held out high, but confusing, expectations for renewing the ministry and life of the clergy. The failure of ecclesiastical leadership not only to implement the documents’ recommendations with due speed, but also to develop a replacement theory for interpreting modern Christianity and the priesthood, increased the clergy’s sense of bewilderment and powerlessness. Yet priest leaders kept hoping and pressing for a new relevancy. This paradox of disillusionment and hope was chronicled by a Catholic journalist who provides us with the following impressions:

> Everywhere I traveled I found people either disappointed or unimpressed with the bishops as leaders... Against this crisis of authority must be balanced the new creativity working its way into the life of the Church. What I see as a creative revolution is the second major impression of my travels (Roche, 1968: xxi-xxii).

This problem hasn’t gone away. Greeley (1972a: 9–10) found that the most serious problem still facing priests was that of authority. It wasn’t that authority was as oppressive in 1972 as it once had been, but that the problem became one of a collapse of credibility and consensus.
VATICAN II AND PRIESTS’ COUNCILS

In the eyes of many then, the hope of renewing the priesthood and ministry rested not with episcopal leadership but with the clergy itself. The Vatican II recommendations on priests’ councils facilitated the efforts of priests to take hold of this responsibility. The Decree Christus Dominus, proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965 (Abbott and Gallagher, 1966: 416), states:

Included among the collaborators of the bishop in the government of the diocese are those priests who constitute his senate or council, such as the cathedral chapter, the board of consultors, or other committees established according to the circumstances or nature of various localities. To the extent necessary, these institutions, especially the cathedral chapters, should be reorganized in keeping with present-day needs.

Priests and lay people who belong to the diocesan curia should realize that they are making a helpful contribution to the pastoral ministry of the bishop.

The diocesan curia should be so organized that it is an appropriate instrument for the bishop, not only for administering the diocese but also for carrying out the works of the apostolate.

This new concept of clergy consultation and representation was further specified by the Motu Proprio letter of Pope Paul VI (1966: 15) entitled Ecclesiae Sanctae:

(1) In each diocese, according to a method and plan to be determined by the bishop, there should be a council of priests, that is a group or senate of priests who represent the body of priests and who by their counsel can effectively assist the bishop in the government of the diocese. In this council the bishop should listen to his priests, consult them and have dialogue with them on those matters which pertain to the needs of pastoral work and the good of the diocese.

(2) Religious may also be named members of the council of priests to the extent that they have the care of souls and take part in the works of the apostolate.

(3) The council of priests has only a consultative vote.

(4) When the See becomes vacant, the council of priests ceases unless in special circumstances to be reviewed by the Holy See the
vicar capitular or apostolic administrator confirms its existence. The new bishop will establish his own new council of priests.

The first council or senate was established in Springfield, Massachusetts, on January 20, 1966 (Kennedy, 1968: 167-68). By May, 1968, there were 135 senates and 28 free associations in operation. These two council types do not have a lot in common. Senates (1) are authorized in the dioceses by the bishops and serve at their pleasure; (2) exist to assist the bishop in the area of the priestly role, diocesan government, personnel policy, organizational problems of the diocese, and pastoral matters; (3) have an approach which is primarily cooperative; (4) are advisory; (5) are conforming organizations considered legitimate by the bishop (see Stewart, 1970; Wuerl, 1970).

The free associations, on the other hand, (1) were established without the authorization or subsequent approval of their bishops; (2) work more independently of the bishops but, at the same time, submit programs of action to them and work for their acceptance. The proposals center around the values of the priest’s person; of his rights; and of the pastoral mission as it relates to the issues of equality, freedom, and justice. Some associations have set up ‘watch dog’ committees to protect priests from unjust sanctions. The association’s approach (3) is more combative; it is willing to use public media to make its position clear. The basic operational policy is to raise questions and press the bishop to face certain issues. The associations (4) have no legitimate power. In sum, the associations are deviant organizations and lack legitimacy as far as the bishops are concerned (see Stewart, 1970).

Further guidelines for establishing priests’ councils were formulated by the Congregation for the Clergy in October, 1969 (Wright, 1970: 53–57). While these guidelines describe the nature, responsibilities, and general purposes of priests’ councils, they stress that councils do not have a deliberative role, except in individual cases designated by the bishop. Furthermore, the guidelines state that, based on the need for common pastoral activity in which the priests and bishop unite to make their work more effective, the council has a special consultative role in advising the bishop upon request. The council, according to the document, is to help, but not replace, the authority and work of the bishop.
Most priests were both confused about the actual structure and operation of these new councils and unhappy at the severe limitation of the power that the councils possessed. Many felt that the notion of authority relations between the bishop and the presbyterium was too narrowly defined within a legal framework. Many priests understood that Vatican II had called for a collegial sharing of authority. They saw authority as one charism which was present in the whole church and not only in the bishops. In the words of Padovano (1970: 207-08):

*The law of mutual dependence is a fundamental law governing the life of the Church. It justifies the principles of decentralization, subsidiarity, co-responsibility, and collegiality.*

Padovano went on to state that senates as representative bodies should not be merely consultative but possess pastoral, charismatic, and sacramental authority which is inherent in the presbyterium and not delegated from the bishop.

The ministry as a function of shared authority was part of a new theology that many priests embraced. Many bishops, however, viewed this as a threat to their office. Some refused to establish senates; other ignored the advice of their councils; still others disbanded councils. In sum, many bishops felt that, while the councils did not have legal authority to make decisions, they could exercise a rather strong moral influence. This they felt would be a threat to the office of the ordinary as presently defined.

Another problem priests faced was that they didn’t know how to go about structuring a council which would not only be truly representative but also be democratic in its deliberations. Moreover, they didn’t know what functions and activities should be included or what their relationships should be with diocesan consultors and with religious and lay organizations.

One experience which helped priests to formalize the structure of the senates was their work with parish organizations. Most parish organizations had some type of constitution and bylaws. Priests seized this mechanisms to begin defining the councils’ purposes, structures, and tasks. Most of these diocesan councils constituted themselves independently of each other. At this early stage, there was no thought of inter-diocesan cooperation. The reason for this is probably due to the fact that they had little experience with
inter-cooperation. Dioceses were independent areas of ministry. I will now discuss briefly these early constitutions.

In 1967, I did an analysis of 123 bylaws and constitutions of diocesan councils. There were: ninety-nine senates (80%), twenty-two associations (18%), and two religious order councils (2%). One noticeable difference between the structure of the senates and the associations is that all the associations elected their members, whereas a number of senates have both elected and appointed members. The constitutions and bylaws of a large minority of both senates and associations evidenced a lack of constitutional provisions and specifications of procedures (see Table 2.1 below). The reason for this, I suggest, is the newness of priests' councils.

The overwhelming majority of councils has advisory powers only. Their general purposes are to represent their fellow priests regarding diocesan issues and affairs and to communicate and advise their respective bishops concerning these matters. None of the councils are any more specific in stating their goals than to say that the council gives advice to the bishop and acts as an agent for a two-way

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<th>Table 2.1 Profile of local councils' constitutions (N = 123)</th>
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<td><strong>Formal structure</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Purposes of Council re:</strong></td>
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<td>Fellow priests:</td>
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<td><strong>Powers of the Council</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Representatives</strong></td>
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<th>Formal structure</th>
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<td>Method of selection</td>
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<td>Elected</td>
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<td>Elected and appointed</td>
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<td>Have an Executive Board</td>
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<td>Channels of communication with bishop</td>
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<td>Dues required</td>
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flow of communication. Most of the councils are formally weak regarding the possession and use of legitimate power. It is problematic how much real, though informal, power each council possesses through its moral persuasion. It is important to note that, though the senates are constituted only with the permission of the bishops, a large number of them have allowed elections to determine the composition of the senates. The average number of committees that the councils have is five. Those committees most
Beginnings of the federation

frequently cited in the documents are: (1) Election, (2) Communication, and (3) Pastoral Ministry. In summary, the councils are at this time muddling through their organizational development. There is neither past precedent nor a national clearinghouse to provide advice and experience for forming these units. Only with the founding of the NFPC did the councils begin to consolidate and develop specific directions.

The priests of the United States were not only concerned about the leadership vacuum of the hierarchy and the lack of shared responsibility; they were also concerned with the issues of personal freedom and rights. Priests felt that as human beings they should have the same right as any other person to exercise the freedom of speech and to protect one’s reputation. They felt that they had to speak from their consciences and say disturbing things not only to their parishioners but also to their bishops. These and many more got into trouble with their bishops and were arbitrarily sanctioned. They protested that their rights and reputations were being violated. Yet there was no adequate procedure of due process to settle these grievances. Monsignor Conway (1966: 200) urged such mechanisms when he wrote:

Whatever the machinery is it must be of such nature that the priest who believes himself unjustly treated can appeal without prejudice to his standing in the diocese. He must not be subject to recriminations for trying to vindicate his rights. Pope John told us that we have a duty to do this.

Another proposal to insure the protection of priests’ rights came from a different direction. Father William DuBay proposed what amounted to a national labor union of priests. Many thought that this idea would create greater discord between bishops and priests and divisions between priests and laity. The plan never got off the ground (O’Gara, 1966: 72). During 1966 and 1967, individual priests like Fathers Peter Riga, Robert Francoeur, James Drane, Dan and Phil Berrigan, and James Groppi were among those voicing opposition. They made national news because of their controversial statements and actions.

Another organizational development critical of the bishops’ leadership was the National Association for Pastoral Renewal. At its height it had a membership of 3,500 active and resigned priests.
Although the NAPR was interested in implementing many renewal programs, its primary interest was the issue of optional celibacy. Its most noteworthy activity was sponsoring a national symposium on celibacy at the University of Notre Dame during the summer of 1967. Also, through a series of surveys during this period of time, the NAPR discovered that about 48% of the priests of the country favored optional celibacy. The American hierarchy responded to these findings by stating that 'it would be irresponsible on our part to hold out any hope that this discipline would change'.

For the most part, however, the responses calling for renewal and the criticisms of the hierarchy came from individual and isolated priests, religious, and laity.

As I have shown, priests' councils were still in a gestating stage. There was no coordination or unified thrust among them. Most were under the authority of the bishop. Would any national voice and action develop among priests in the United States? Where would such united efforts spring from?

**Beginnings of Collective Action**

The Archdiocese of Chicago had a long tradition of bishops who allowed their priests to develop leadership in the areas of the liturgy, social and economic justice, and the lay apostolate. Men like Monsignors Hillenbrand, Cantwell, and Egan were nationally respected leaders. They brought new ideas and programs into the church. Hillenbrand expanded the lay apostolate by applying the *jocist* techniques to families, workers, and students. Cantwell involved the church in racial and economic issues. Egan committed the archdiocese to the community organization philosophy of Saul Alinsky.

Cardinal Meyer was a champion of religious liberty. His untimely death and the appointment of his successor, Archbishop Cody, a strong-willed authority figure, brought about a morale crisis among the Chicago clergy. Before Archbishop Cody officially arrived in Chicago, sixteen priests were meeting secretly to mobilize their colleagues to form an association of priests. The one who spearheaded this effort was Father John Hill, an associate to
Monsignor Egan at Presentation parish. After several public meetings, attended by several hundred priests, Hill and several other priests approached Archbishop Cody for recognition of the new association. After a number of tense meetings and negotiations, the Archbishop finally agreed to its creation.

The Association of Chicago Priests (ACP) was among the first of the independently formed councils of priests. It was democratically structured to represent all the priests' concerns to the Archbishop. It had a considerable degree of autonomy and influence compared to senates. It moved quickly into ministerial issues such as election of bishops and formation of parish lay councils. Its agenda also included the social justice ministry. Father Raymond Goedert said (Roche, 1968: 201):

Our most important accomplishment has been the development of a professional organization independent of the chancery office and yet without excluding the bishop. This has been a creative act and the priests' morale has improved, especially by the kind of seminars we hold.

The ACP also sponsored symposia featuring such outstanding theologians as Küng, Schillebeeckx, Cooke, and Häring. These theologians of renewal attracted the attention of priests outside Chicago. Many of these priests were known to each other because of their involvements in the lay, liturgical, and social apostolates. In January and February, some of these men had begun informal discussions with the Chicago leaders about the possibility of some joint collaboration. On May 8, 1967, they attended, as observers, the second plenary session of the ACP. Through prior arrangements, they asked the Chicago leaders to set up an ad hoc meeting for discussing some type of national cooperation.

This meeting was held on May 9, 1967. Father William Graney spoke to eighty-eight eastern and midwestern priests about the need for mutual assistance on a national level. He stated that senates and associations of priests, in and of themselves, are no guarantee of the rights of priests. The discussions centered around a reporting of what was being done by the individual chapters, especially in terms of structural development and the feasibility of, and procedures for, establishing a national association.

Father John Daily moved to establish an ad hoc committee to
study the need for a national association and to contact the local senates and associations for their reactions. It would also act as a steering committee to convene meetings of the local councils. Father Robert Kennedy from Brooklyn was unanimously chosen as chairman of the committee. Father Graney of Chicago was selected as public relations officer. Father Bob Malm from Brooklyn was appointed treasurer. Father John Hill was asked to receive the names of other dioceses interested in a national association. Father Kennedy was given the responsibility of selecting the members of the steering committee (Minutes, 1967).

On May 31, there was a meeting of this committee in Philadelphia to interest priests from the East Coast in the idea of a national federation. Kennedy also called monthly liaison meetings throughout the summer between leaders from the East Coast and the Midwest. On June 20, Father Kennedy and a group of midwestern priests met in Chicago to discuss the feasibility of a regional meeting.

**Committee of Eight**

On July 13, this group was expanded to what was to be known as the ‘Committee of Eight’. It was decided to hold a regional meeting in September. The purpose was primarily to provide an informational exchange meeting regarding the problems and experiences of the councils in the Midwest. They felt that the idea of a national collaboration should not be emphasized at this September meeting. The agenda and details of the September meeting were formulated at a meeting on August 25.

The ‘Committee of Eight’, representing eight midwestern provinces, was responsible for contacting the councils in the forty-two dioceses and seeking their advice and participation in the formation of the September agenda. These leaders were a bit cautious at this time about promoting the idea of a national association for fear that they might be charged with forcing the notion on local councils. Also, they did not know what reactions to expect from the bishops. As will be shown shortly, there was no need for an alarm. At the same time that this meeting was being planned, Father Kennedy was planning a winter meeting of councils in the New England area.
On September 8, 1967, the following press release was issued by Father Graney:

A Midwest regional meeting on Catholic priests’ councils will be held in Chicago on Sept. 25 and 26.

Priests from a 10-state area in the Midwest will meet to discuss their experiences in beginning and developing senates and associations of priests. The ten states are Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Each senate or association in the 42 dioceses in the area has been invited by the committee to send four representatives. The committee includes: Fathers Thomas P. Carroll of St. Louis, Mo.; Patrick Flood of Milwaukee, Wise.; John McCaslin of Omaha, Neb.; James Moudry of St. Paul, Minn.; Patrick O’Malley of Chicago, Ill.; James Supple of Dubuque, Ia.; Robert Walpole of Indianapolis, Ind.; and Mel Wendrick of Detroit, Mich.

The purpose of the meeting is to exchange information so that each group may benefit from the experience of what other groups are doing, the committee indicated in their letter of invitation.

The agenda singles out three areas for discussion: structural problems of associations and senates, personnel matters, and communications.

Of the forty-two dioceses invited, thirty-eight responded, sending 123 delegates. Also in attendance were thirty-one observers from other dioceses. Summary statements regarding diocesan communications, council structures, and personnel matters were unanimously adopted. These statements, taken from the official report of the meeting, are as follows (Report, 1967).

**Communications:**

The necessity of communication arises from the very purpose of Priests’ Senates and Associations. These bodies are established to discover the common concerns and goals of the clergy. This common purpose necessitates two-way lines of communication in many areas.

Communication must be established between Senates and Associations with the priests whom they represent. This would
require that many relevant lines of communication be tried and tested to establish the clearest lines of communication.

Communication requires that the bishop listen openly to the recommendations and ideas of the Senates and Associations. The agenda of meetings with the bishop must express the concern of both the priests and bishop. Both the bishop and the Priests’ Senates and Associations must be open to the common concern of all priests whom they represent. Hopefully, Senates and Associations will continue to develop new lines of communication with diocesan agencies, so that the work of Senates and Associations will influence and be influenced by these groups in each diocese.

Communication with the laity is of utmost importance if Senates and Associations are to be relevant. The 'know how' and ideas of the laity will help renew the Church as the total people of God.

Finally, communication across diocesan and provincial lines will help to clarify and encourage the roles of Priests’ Senates and Associations.

**Personnel:**

The principles of Personnel Policy are contained in Vatican II and have been specified in documents in Chicago and St. Paul. The dignity of priests and people is of first importance in every assignment. There is a need for a personnel board for the good of the people, the morale of the priests and the competence of the bishop.

This personnel board should be elected at least in part from the total body of priests in the diocese. For the good of the Church the bishop should normally implement the recommendations of the personnel board and give reasons when he rejects their recommendations.

The personnel board should be creative in looking for new roles for the priest in the mission of the Church. They should draw on the professional advice of experts in the field of personnel, from industry, government and the private sector. Finally, adequate procedures for handling grievances should be established either by a personnel board or a separate grievance board. Confidentiality must be assured to priests who take advantage of this service.
Council Structures:

The assembled priests acknowledge the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the benefits that derive from the structural corporate effort of priests, whether it takes the form of a Diocesan Senate or an Association of Priests.

Among the benefits gained through priests' councils are an increased professional awareness among priests and more effective cooperation with the bishops in our common task of ministry in the Church.

We recognize certain means as essential to the realization of these benefits: election structures that guarantee democratic representation in deliberating bodies; committee structures that give adequate voice to the priests and assure their involvement in the activities of the council, expressing, thereby, trust in the collective competence and judgment of the body of priests; and the need for continued reexamination of existing structures to find better ways of realizing effective ministry in the Church.

Finally we recognize that priests and their councils are but one dimension of the Church of God and, consequently, we affirm and encourage the right of the laity to organize and speak freely in the Church.

Finally, the 'Committee of Eight' presented to the parliamentary session the following resolution:

BE IT RESOLVED: That it be recommended to all Senates and Associations of the eight provinces that they support the next meeting of the priests of this region.

The Committee of Eight has a further recommendation to make to this body as a result of the opinions expressed on the evaluation sheet at lunch—and in an effort to give continuance to both the spirit and the work of this meeting. We would recommend the establishment of inter-diocesan study and action groups, these to be administered by the Committee of Eight.

Hence the Committee recommends: That the Committee of Eight establish 'ad hoc' inter-diocesan commissions for action and study of matters of concern expressed at this meeting.

Two important amendments to the above statement were proposed from the floor and unanimously adopted. They are as follows:
1. That the delegates to this convention urge their present groups to establish working relationships with such groups in other dioceses, working with the Committee of Eight.

2. That the Committee of Eight place high priority in their consideration for the establishment of one inter-diocesan commission to study the feasibility of a central clearing office for the midwest area. If feasible, such a committee would propose a plan for the financing, the personnel requirements, and the job description of such an office for formal vote at the next meeting.

According to Father John Hill (1967), the meeting was full of hope. He reported little complaining about bishops’ deficiencies or about the sagging morale of priests. He quoted one delegate as saying: ‘Priests around the country are thirsting for this kind of experience’.

The ‘Committee of Eight’ asked representatives from all the dioceses in attendance at the regional meeting to report reactions from the bishops and local councils. Thirty-eight representatives said that they had informed the bishops, but only thirteen said that their bishops were favorable, while twenty-five were uncertain. Twenty-six reported that their local councils were favorable with twelve being uncertain. Twenty-three councils favored further meetings of this type, six were uncertain, and there was no response from nine councils on this question.

On December 27 and 28, a regional meeting was held in Boston representing dioceses from New England and the Middle Atlantic states. The purpose of the meeting was similar to the Midwest regional meeting in September. A coordinating committee similar to the ‘Committee of Eight’ was established to conduct annual meetings for New England Senates and to act as a communication exchange.

In early winter, a questionnaire (Kennedy, 1967) was sent out to all the existing senates (approximately 130) to assess the effectiveness of the councils and to get reactions to the formation of a national organization. Sixty-five senates replied.

The data showed that most of the senates were established on the initiative of the bishop, and, foreshadowing what was to develop, most of them were set up by committees of priests independently of the chancery staff. The chancery participated in the establishment of eleven senates. Almost all of the senators were elected. Most
dioceses selected members of the senate on a combination of regional and age-group bases.

The first thing that most senates did was to write a constitution to solidify their structure and purpose. Almost universally they wrote their own, without outside help or borrowing from other groups. Almost unanimously the senates felt that they had a consultative function only; four senates reported the existence of legislative functions, and, in two instances, the bishop had bound himself to accept the senate's decisions. Only ten senates felt that their function was concerned solely with priests' problems; the others felt that their area of competence involved the whole government of the diocese.

However, the structure of the various senates shows that most of their standing committees deal with problems of priests or with the continuance of the senate itself. For instance, the most numerous committees were those dealing with personnel problems and the continuing education of priests.

The easiest way to have the senate's proposal accepted by the bishop is to have him attend the senate meeting. He is present in less than one-half of the dioceses. The worst way to accomplish matters is just to send him the minutes of what took place. Another form used is a bargaining session between the bishop and the executive committee of the senate.

In twenty dioceses personnel committees have been established as a result of senate action, and separate grievance committees function in eleven dioceses, although fifteen of the twenty personnel committees include this under their competency. About one-third of the dioceses reporting have race relations committees or social action committees, but only a handful of these relate to the senate.

One-third of the dioceses answering the questionnaire have definite programs for the retirement of priests. But only eight of these were due to senate action. The favored age for retirement is seventy-five, with a few having seventy as the mandatory age.

Many obstacles to the smooth functioning of senates were cited. The most frequently mentioned were non-cooperation of diocesan officials and lack of trust of the bishop. However, other obstacles pointed to difficulties of the senate itself. Lack of committee structure and research, unfamiliarity with democratic processes and
parliamentary procedure, as well as an over-crowded agenda, were often mentioned as difficulties.

The greatest successes of senates have been in facilitating communication between priests and bishop and among priests themselves. Many felt that the morale of the diocese had been raised because of the existence of the senate.

Methods of introducing items on the agenda are generally very open, with priests of the diocese, members of the senate, and the bishop enjoying equal rights. However, in about one-third of the dioceses, only senators can attend the meetings, and in almost all senates, only the senators are allowed to speak at the meeting. Minutes of the meetings are sent out by most senates to all priests in the diocese.

The questionnaire findings showed that most senates would welcome regional get-togethers of senates and associations of priests. Almost all thought that a national newsletter on senate operations would be useful. More than 75% would see a value in a national association of priests' senates.

FEASIBILITY OF A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

This research on the local senates, the two regional meetings, and multiple contacts with local councils convinced the 'Committee of Eight' of the need and desire for communication and collaboration on a wider scale. The Committee announced on January 17, 1968, that it was arranging a national feasibility meeting. This announcement was preceded by personal phone calls to all the provincial and diocesan contacts, informing them that such a meeting would be called. Besides discussing the improvement and efficiency of the councils' structure and work, the meeting would take up the idea of establishing a national structure for mutual assistance and the solution of felt needs.

This feasibility meeting was held on February 12 and 13, 1968. Of the 136 dioceses who had either a senate and/or association, 111 dioceses (82%) sent 298 representatives. There was a nearly unanimous approval of establishing a national organization to coordinate the work of senates and associations. The delegates also
voted to expand the eight-man steering committee to twenty-nine so that all the provinces would be represented, as well as religious orders and the Eastern Rite Catholic Church. They voted to establish a national secretariat to coordinate activities and a constitutional committee to draft the constitution and bylaws for the new organization. A constitutional convention was called for May, 1968.

At a press conference following the feasibility meeting, Father Kennedy stated: 'A national organization is needed because present church law has left a vacuum. There is no means for communication between priests and their bishop.' Asked at the press conference if the U.S. bishops had given their approval for the formation of a national organization, Father Anthony Morris of Atlanta, Georgia, said: 'Actually they haven't been asked, although they were well informed in advance of this meeting'. A detailed analysis of the feasibility and constitutional meetings is given in the next chapter.

Between February 15 and May 1, the constitutional committee drew up a draft of a national constitution and bylaws. This would be the main agenda item for the May 20 convention. Five standing committees were also initiated at the February meeting. These were (1) Personnel, (2) Role of the Priest (later to be called Ministry and Priestly Life), (3) Communications, (4) Priests' Councils and Laity, and (5) Social Action (later to be called Justice and Peace). These committees were also busy with the formulation of goals and programs for the new organization.

CONSTITUTING THE NFPC

At the constitutional meeting, May 20–21, 1968, delegates from 116 dioceses voted the National Federation of Priests' Councils into existence. They approved a Constitution (see Appendix I), formally established the five standing committees, established a budget, and elected the Executive Board. Father Patrick O'Malley was elected the first president of the NFPC. Out of 126 councils present, 114 affiliated with the Federation; there were ninety-three senates and twenty-one associations.

It was significant that only one item of new business was introduced. Father John McCaslin from Omaha, Nebraska, moved that
the NFPC should support the Poor People’s Campaign. The motion was passed with one amendment: that the NFPC give $1,000 from its treasury to support the poor people’s march.

The convention ended with the following words of Father Colin MacDonald: ‘I think as we near the adjournment, we have wings; and God willing, we will fly’. And fly it did. As will be shown in the rest of this book, the NFPC started its course through the uncharted waters of collegiality. The NFPC was saying to the U.S. bishops: deal with us with respect as partners in the ministry. This was a new day both for the American priests and their bishops.

During the ensuing year, employing fatiguing but fruitful democratic procedures, the NFPC developed an agenda of concrete goals toward which to work. Initially, the emphasis was on ‘interest’ issues of the priests, such as priests’ rights, collegial participation in governance, due process, and personnel matters. These issues created controversy with the bishops and as a consequence some of the priests’ councils would disaffiliate. As will be shown in the last two chapters, this controversial aura stayed with the Federation until their Denver convention in March, 1972, when a shift in policy direction took place.

In the span of one year, from a situation where local councils were individually trying to define themselves, there was founded the beginnings of a national federation of councils. Some members would criticize the Federation for not being progressive enough. Others would be fearful and mistrusting of the leadership. Others would become so unhappy with its embroilments that they would resign from the Federation. Conservative newspapers and theologians would attack it as being disloyal to the bishops. The bishops on the whole would formally ignore it but informally would begin dialogue with its leaders.

What is of the greatest significance is that the American clergy took hold of leadership for renewing the priesthood and ministry. The Federation and its leadership gave the priests in the United States a common voice and a mechanism to initiate programs of change. The leaders weren’t rebels or revolutionaries, but innovators. In their mandate for change they declared both their cooperation with, and loyalty to, the bishops. At the same time, with an autonomous organization established, priests of the country
gained for themselves a new respect. They were pastoral leaders in their own right. Modern theology has pointed this out and the organization would now articulate it. There were the beginnings of a new reciprocity, no longer tilted, between the clergy and bishops. Perhaps without either group fully understanding it, the ordinary priests initiated through the Federation the first significant steps toward collegiality and subsidiarity.

In the next chapter I will discuss the structure and operations of the NFPC at the foundation stage of its development.