The moment of truth has arrived for us, the delegates of the National Federation of Priests’ Councils of the United States of America, and for those whom we represent. There may never be another moment like this within our lifetime. We now wish to speak of our hopes and our concerns, our faith and our lives, within the Church and the world of today.

We address ourselves to the bishops of our country, to the bishops who will speak for us at the International Synod in Rome, and to the Synod itself.

We are men who live in a society marked by rapid and deep change. We are men who live in a Church in which 25,000 of our brother priests around the world have resigned in the past seven years. We are men who live in a Church where over one-third of the priests who participated in our survey, ‘A Study of Priestly Celibacy’, has a serious problem with the lack of leadership from those in authority and shares a deep disappointment in the Church’s stand on social and moral issues. Almost one out of three of these priests surveyed is disturbed by the slow pace of change in view of the call for renewal by the bishops of Vatican II. Three out of four have one or more friends who have left the active ministry, and 25% know others who plan to leave. We know that those who are leaving are, for the most part, creative and intelligent men.

The fact that life seems to be taking shape apart from the Church and without the gospel dimension disturbs a significant number of us. Many priests feel that they live in an isolated ecclesiastical world because of archaic Church structures. When we try to relate to this rapidly changing society we often merely react, arrive late on the scene, or imitate, but seldom lead.

The Church exists for the sake of the kingdom of God. It centers its life around people rather than institutional forms. The Church is the sign, the sacrament of the kingdom here on earth in our time, a dynamic movement within humanity, calling mankind to the kingdom which is to come.

The events of our time, therefore, demand that we speak. This, indeed, is our moment of truth.
LEADERSHIP

First, we speak to the problem which most seriously troubles priests today, the lack of leadership from those in authority, both bishops and priests.

Our ministerial priesthood reflects the love of Jesus Christ for his Church whenever bishops and priests are in dialogue and rapport. A bishop alone does not bear the responsibility for the ministry of the local Church. The bishop, along with his priests, religious and laity, shares this responsibility. Most difficulties arise from the refusal to share such responsibility.

We, therefore, call upon the bishops of the United States to share responsibility on the local level. Such sharing must be initiated with mutual trust and genuine communication among bishops, priests, religious and laity. Vatican II states that the bishop should regard priests as his brothers and friends because they share in the same priesthood and ministry.

Effective leadership depends in large measure on the acceptance of the leader by the people. We, therefore, support the suggestions of the Canon Law Society of America for the selection of bishops which includes broad consultation with priests, religious and laity. We also recommend a definite term of office for bishops.

CHURCH STRUCTURES

Church structures exist to serve the people of God. The basic structure through which most priestly ministry now operates is the geographic parish, with all that it implies in terms of residence, grouping of priest, lifestyle, and patterns of authority. There is a place for such a structure, subject to necessary reform, but we are convinced that other forms are also necessary to meet the needs of the People of God in our times, and these new forms will grow from the needs they serve.

These needs may call for non-geographical apostolates, co-pastorates, self-supporting ministries, team approaches, and an expanded sharing in ministry by the laity, including an official ministry by women. Whatever their form, these ministries should not become mere individual solutions applied to existing problems. They must be part of a planned approach to Church re-organization. And in order to develop new ministries, priests must be given encouragement and financial assistance to design new programs, the freedom to experiment, and the opportunity to develop necessary skills.
HUMAN RIGHTS

Men question the honesty of a Church which is to be a model of justice and love, but which has often failed to protect among its own members those human rights which it holds up to the world as sacred. Therefore, we are compelled to demand that the human rights of all in the Church be secured through the immediate establishment of effective administrative tribunals and due process at every level in the Church.

We accept a corresponding responsibility on our part to recognize that all men have these same rights. We also insist on complete openness and accountability from all who serve the Church in any of its institutional structures.

CELIBACY

Celibacy is a precious tradition of the Church and must be preserved. Its witness value is an established fact. However, we are convinced that this value will be enhanced by being freely embraced and not as a necessary adjunct to the priesthood.

The substance of fidelity in ministry, however, is a commitment to service, and the charism of celibacy is subordinate to the charism of service. Faithful ministry in the Church can also be effectively exercised by married priests. Therefore, we are convinced that the present law of mandatory celibacy in the western Church must be changed.

Although such a change will involve certain practical difficulties and problems, the need for this change far outweighs the problems it might create, and we call for the change to begin now.

We ask that the choice between celibacy and marriage for priests now active in the ministry be allowed and that the change begin immediately. Furthermore, no group should be deprived of priests simply because married men cannot leave their families or environment to spend long years in formal seminary training. We ask that national hierarchies be empowered to implement plans at once which will allow the acceptance of married men as candidates for the priesthood. Finally, in a spirit of brotherhood, we ask that priests who have already married be invited to resume the active ministry. Decisions concerning the return of these men should be made by the Ordinary, the Personnel Board, the local community, and the priest himself in the light of particular circumstances.
PRIESTS AND HOLINESS

We affirm that the core of renewal lies in a change of heart, in an interior renewal for each priest. Nothing can so enrich the priest's interior life as knowing Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The priest's commitment is to bear witness to Christ no matter what form his ministry takes. He must be a man who knows Christ in the Eucharist and in the other sacraments, in the sacred Scriptures, in prayer, in the signs of the times, in the daily lives of people and in himself.

Jesus dedicated his life in service to his fellow man. The ordained minister of today and tomorrow, as a disciple of Jesus, can neither narrow his horizons of concern nor spurn the collaboration of others in the pursuit of rights and happiness for all mankind. The total ministerial resources of the Church can contribute much to meeting the social challenges of our day, especially in seeking peace, in easing social and racial tensions, in relieving poverty and sickness, in struggling for a sound ecology and in assisting underdeveloped and emerging nations.

The unique call to the priests of our times is to struggle as leaders for the renewal of society and the Church, and it is within this context of struggle that the priest develops his spirituality. We call for the rededication of priests to the mission of the Church today and for the reform of institutions within it, a reform which provides a climate of freedom to hear the call of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Change in our society is inevitable, and the Church must not fail to read the signs of the times. The renewal we call for is in accord with the best traditions of the Church, and reflects the thinking of the men and women who have committed their lives to the Church of Christ.

We speak to meet the needs of the people we serve, the culture we live in, and the call of the Spirit we follow. What we call for involves risk and courage, qualities that have marked Christians through the ages.

We call upon the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United States bishop-delegates to the International Synod of Bishops, and the Synod itself to support decisive legislation to initiate or implement our recommendations. We likewise invite all lay people, religious, deacons, priests and bishops to cooperate with one another in order to secure the objectives of these renewal proposals.
Without panic or despair, with realism and hope, we underscore the urgency of these recommendations. In the words of Ecclesiastes, ‘There is an appointed time for everything . . . a time to tear down and a time to build . . . a time to keep and a time to cast away . . . a time to be silent and a time to speak . . .’. We would say a time for renewal, the moment of truth. That moment is now!