

NEWS RELEASE * National Federation of Priests' Councils

333 N. Michigan Avenue * Suite 1205 * Chicago, IL 60601 *

Tel: (888) 271-NFPC (6372) * 312-442-9700

Fax: (312) 442-9709 www.nfpc.org

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For information contact -

Vic Doucette: doucette@nfpc.org

National Priests' Group Reflects on Call to Holiness and Wholeness

(April 15, 2010, Houston, Tex.) - Although many priests feel taxed by the ongoing crisis in the Catholic Church, they continue to draw from a reserve of hope and a continued growth in interest in helping the People of God claim the dividends of embracing the joy of a life lived in service to Jesus Christ and to God's people. Although no one can claim exemption from the hurt being felt in the priesthood and the church, the majority of priests continue undaunted, giving credit to the gift of God in their lives, confident that lives lived in unselfish and joyful service will bring many happy returns.

The necessity of humor in the priesthood was one of a number of topics addressed and reflected upon at the 42nd convening of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. Over 150 priest-leaders from around the nation gathered at the Hilton Houston Post Oak Hotel to reflect on the theme of Holiness and Wholeness in the priesthood. This is the first year that the gathering was organized as a Conference, with the intention of encouraging any priest to attend for their own ongoing formation.

Fr. Richard Vega, priest of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and President of the NFPC, welcomed Conference participants, inviting them to draw from the depth of wisdom of the Conference speakers and the collective support of one another, each who bring a wealth of experience and wisdom. Flanked by banners acknowledging the role of priests as Reconciler, Shepherd, Mediator, Comforter, Preacher and Teacher, Fr. Vega reminded the clergy that "We are priests best when we are priests together!"

In his keynote presentation on Tuesday, Most Rev. John Quinn, Archbishop Emeritus of San Francisco, began his talk by saying, "I am here to pay tribute to you, the priests of the US!" Recounting stories of a number of exemplary priests he has encountered along the way, Archbishop Quinn expressed how he has both admired and been humbled by the unselfish and joyful ministry of so many priests. He expressed the reality that it is priests who are on the front line, "who are there to hear the pain of our people over the betrayal of some of our priests and the failings of some of our bishops; who are there to walk with and support those who have suffered the wounds of that betrayal; who are there to give reassurance to parents and children; who weep over the desecration of the priesthood; who are at the very heart of where the wound is." To this, he adds, we are there to embrace and hold up to ourselves and our people "the only and the real reason to persevere: Jesus Christ."

Archbishop Quinn acknowledged that we are at a critical time in the church, a time some would compare to the Reformation. He asked the question asked at one time by Karl Rahner: "Why would a modern man want to become or remain a priest today?" His response is that it is not in great works of the church in justice and peace, but in so many priests where he sees "a readiness for unselfish sacrifice, prayer, and total dedication to the following of Christ crucified... and where I see the many faces of renunciation at the core of a priesthood lived in fidelity to Christ." He goes on to say, "I see it in those priests putting their hand in the hand of Christ, and daily giving themselves in unselfish, difficult and unsung service."

Referencing Jesus' Final Discourse in the Gospel of John (Jn 14:17), Archbishop Quinn related that Jesus spoke these words to a group of disciples who were at the breaking point. It was dark and they were in a dark night as well. Jesus gives a command, "Do not let your hearts be troubled!" expressing

to them that the basis of trust is “not that everything will turn out well, but that despite their trials God will be near them, in them, and will heal their radical loneliness. He tells them, “abide, remain, continue, endure—not in his power or wisdom—but in his love.”

“The only question that really matters,” Archbishop Quinn offers, “is ‘Do you love me more than these?’” The real sign of authentic priesthood is the stirring within of the desire to be life-giving. He claims that this is one of the best times to be a priest, “counted worthy to sacrifice for Christ, to be a martyr-witness, not a martyr-victim, called to an evangelical humility and a robust faith, to be ministers of consolation and evangelical hope, drawing from the waters of hope, perseverance, sacrifice and love flowing from the side of Jesus.”

Archbishop Quinn offered a final reassurance by emphasizing that the great works of God have been accomplished in darkness: the Exodus from Egypt; they crossed the Red Sea in the darkness; Jesus was born in the darkness of night; he gave us the Eucharist and the priesthood at the Last Supper in the darkness of night; the death of Jesus on the cross “when darkness covered the earth;” he lay in the darkness of the tomb; he rose in the darkness; and, the empty tomb was discovered “early in the morning, while it was still dark.” In the darkness of this time in the church, Archbishop Quinn assures us, “God continues to work through those priests who faithfully connect with the Lord in prayer at least one hour a day, and who live unselfishly, joyfully in life-giving service.”

Fr. Lou Cameli, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Archbishop’s Delegate for Christian Formation and Mission offered an insightful presentation titled, “Wise Men or Nice Guys? Priests Pastoring with the Intellect of Faith.” Fr. Cameli focused his talk on the greater need for intellectual formation among priests. “Intellectual formation is often eclipsed by the other three pillars of formation: spiritual, pastoral and human formation.” Fr. Cameli emphasized the critical need for priests to be teachers “in the ways that Jesus was a teacher, in formal and informal moments, often in the brief encounters when he helped move people along in their conversion to a new way of life.” Priests need to cultivate a ministerial style that helps people “move along” in their faith development, that is “thoughtful, from the heart, that goes to the heart.”

Fr. Cameli distinguished between priests ordained between 1965 and 1985, many who struggled with understanding church teaching especially regarding birth control and sexuality, and priests ordained since 1985, many who are looking for clarity in a culture that seems to be adrift and who feel that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Code of Canon Law are all you need to help people move along. He emphasizes that many priests fall into a teaching mode that is, “This is what the church says, there is no need for dialogue, and that’s it!” This does not help people move along in their spiritual life and deeper conversion.

He stated that we have a lot to offer our people because, in many ways, our experiences in ministry help form us as “experts in humanity who help people move beyond information to claim truth and find true wisdom and direction for their lives.” There is a depth in priests who have ministered pastorally and compassionately listened to people’s struggles on various life issues that is extraordinary, that has helped them develop and deepen skills that do meet people where they are at, and help move them along in understanding and embracing the gifts that our teachings have to offer.”

Fr. Cameli offered a series of “urgent questions” that priests face daily, questions that presbyterates should dialogue and reflect upon: “Do we continue to move in the direction of what has been called “massive Christianity” or do we focus on a more intentional and deliberate Christian commitment? How will we, as people of faith, engage our culture—by accommodation or resistance? (Being a sacramental church means we are not of the world, but minister within the world.) How shall we

respond to the movement of peoples, ideas and goods? In what way can we not only offer moral direction but also a moral infrastructure for people today? “Our answers to these questions will require prayer, good will and honest, creative and respectful dialogue.”

Fr. Jim Martin, SJ challenged the gathered priests to see the essential need for humor as a component of our spiritual health with his presentation, “Laughing with the Saints: Joy, Humor and Laughter in the Spiritual Life.” Fr. Martin is the author of *My Life with the Saints* and a new book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*. Through a series of reflections and a number of good religious jokes, Fr. Martin raised up the power of humor and joy in the spiritual and pastoral life of a priest. “If you are deadly serious all of the time, you are probably seriously dead.”

Commenting on some critics who say that there is no humor in the Gospels, Fr. Martin suggested that during the time of the writing of the Gospels, the church was struggling. He does believe that there is humor in the scriptures that the people of Jesus’ time would have seen as such, but which eludes us today. One such passage: Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” could be seen as a bit of humor.

Fr. Martin highlighted ten reasons for embracing humor in ministry. 1) Humor evangelizes; it expresses our faith in God; that we believe in the power of the Resurrection, in life over death. 2) Humor is a tool for humility: to joke about ourselves expresses a self-confidence and makes us human. 3) Humor shocks listeners into reality. 4) Humor speaks truth to power. Jesus did this as a weapon against arrogance and power. 5) Humor shows Christian courage. See St. Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr as an example, “Turn me over; I’m done on one side.” 6) Humor deepens our relationship with God. Imagine yourself smiling at God smiling at you! 7) Humor welcomes, puts us and others at ease; 8) Humor is healing. Physiologically it releases endorphins. 9) Humor opens our minds. We/others relax, are more able to listen and learn. 10) Humor is fun. It is a foretaste of heaven.

In a talk titled “Flourishing in the Priesthood Today,” Fr. John Cecero, SJ, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Fordham university and Rector of the Jesuit Community and Director of the Center for Spirituality and Mental Health at Fordham, priests were encouraged to embrace the notion of flourishing as a state of optimal functionality embodying “generativity, growth and resilience.” The contrasting state is one of languishing, of being in a state of emptiness, shallowness.

Fr. Cecero quoted statistics which indicate that only 20% of the general population is flourishing. A study of priests done in 2005, at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis, indicated that there was greater emotional exhaustion, anxiety and depression among priests compared to the general population. In fact, depression was seven times higher among priests. Five years later, a study of priests done by Msgr. Steve Rossetti indicates that priests are no more sick than the general population. A recent University of Chicago survey of job satisfaction indicated that clergy (Catholic and others) are at the very top of the list.

Fr. Cecero said that, in order to move toward a more authentic holiness and wholeness, “we need to move from recovery to flourishing.” Interestingly, being free of depression and other psychological ailments does not get us to flourishing... or vice versa. “Mother Teresa could be said to have flourished in her ministry, but was still sad and at times depressed. There is hope for us!”

There are twenty-four virtues that one needs to practice in order to flourish in life. Fr. Cecero highlighted five that he feels are critical for priests to practice. First is creativity, “an everyday creativity that leads one to imagine two or three solutions to everyday problems. Such creativity is

nurtured and marked by wide interests, going out of one's comfort zone, e.g., reading something we don't normally read, doing something without being afraid you're going to get it wrong.

A second virtue is vitality, "a subjective experience of energy, aliveness, a sense that we can have influence over another, that it's okay to move out of our learned helplessness to actually go and do something, and that it is okay to say 'no' at times." Vitality is also nurtured through regular exercise and proper self-care.

A third virtue is love, a need for a generative love: family, friends, peers. Fr. Cecero emphasized the need for priest-peers who can walk with us. "With such intimacy in our lives, we are more likely to seek support, to compromise, and have a greater sense of self-esteem." Quoting Pedro Arrupe, he offered, "Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in a love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the mornings, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

A fourth virtue is humility, the capacity to never overestimate or underestimate who we are. "It is acknowledging that I am loved, warts and all." Humility helps us face criticism without falling apart.

The fifth virtue to nurture is gratitude. It is reflecting on what we are thankful for. "A good end-of-day examen is to ask the question: Where was God laboring for me today and what was my response?"

Fr. Cecero highlighted four indications of vocational satisfaction for priests: 1) Authentic engagement in the life of the parish/the people; 2) A sense of being divinely called by God to this vocation ... and listening to God; 3) Relationship with other clergy. At St. Luke Institute, a common denominator among priests who go there is that they have no priest-peer relationships; and 4) Opportunities to help others. As a final challenge and invitation, Fr. Cecero suggested that priests needed to compile stories of the transforming experiences that move us to flourishing in our priesthood.

On Tuesday evening, after a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, a dinner and awards ceremony was held. Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, a priest of the Diocese of Syracuse, former President and CEO of St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, and currently a faculty member of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, was presented with the 2010 NFPC Touchstone Award. Msgr. Rossetti was honored for his extensive work and publications addressing clergy sexual abuse, and for his role in bringing healing to local presbyterates, and in promoting psycho-spiritual wellness among clergy and religious.

On Thursday evening, the Knights of Columbus of the United States were honored with the NFPC Mandatum Award for their long history (since 1881) of supporting and encouraging young men and women in their call to a vocation to priesthood and religious life, as well as for their work in highlighting Pope Benedict XVI's Year of the Priest.

Workshops on Thursday focused on topics such as Priestly Wholeness and Holiness, Developing the Values of Priests as Servant Leaders, A Holistic Approach to Health, A Holistic and Holy Perspective on the Power and Purpose of Food, and Caring for Oneself While Caring for an Aging Parent.

Conference business focused on visioning and strategic planning in order for NFPC to meet the present and future needs and challenges of US presbyterates. Presbyterates will be solicited to give input into this process in the coming months.