

NEWS RELEASE * National Federation of Priests' Councils

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

Tel: (312) 442-9700 * www.nfpc.org

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For information contact:

Alan Szafraniec: szafraniec@nfpc.org

“RENEWING THE HEART OF THE CHURCH” FOCUS OF THE 2014 NFPC CONVOCATION

“There is nothing more important in our ministry than to be men of hope.” These words of Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory echoed throughout the various talks presented at the 46th Anniversary Convocation of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. Nearly 100 priests from 44 dioceses, priests associations and religious institutes gathered at the Atlanta Marriott Buckhead Hotel & Conference Center in Atlanta, Georgia from April 28th - May 1st, 2014 to pray, reflect and dialogue on the theme “Renewing the Heart of the Church.”

A report from the US Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations

Rev. John Guthrie, Associate Director of the USCCB Secretariat for Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations reported on items being focused on at the national level in relation to priests and religious. He noted that there are a number of good resources devoted to the 2014 theme of Priest as Confessor and Priest as Penitent. [Editor's Note: *Click here* for resource list.] <http://nfpc.org/resources-for-ongoing-formation-of-priests-for-the-new-evangelization/>

The USCCB thematic focus for 2015 is Marriage and the Pastoral Care of the Family. This includes a Revised Rite of Marriage, Promotion of the Gift and Responsibility of Marriage in the Church, the Eighth World Meeting of Families being held in September 2015 in Philadelphia, and, of course, the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization.”

Also of note is the Holy See's designation of 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life and at the national level, the development of CCLV Guidelines on the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions, a National Directory on the Permanent Diaconate, development of Hispanic Vocations, Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministry and Vocations for Hispanics.

Overall, Fr. Guthrie noted, priesthood continues to be challenged by a growing workload, a growing number of retired priests. [In 1970, 3% of overall priest population, 10% over 65; in 2009, 22% retired or semi-retired, 40% over 65; and a general dip in happiness because of workload, 42.3% of all priests surveyed].

Father Jan Michael Joncas: Leading the liturgy in a post-modern world

On Tuesday morning, Fr. Jan Michael Joncas, Artist-in-Residence Fellow at the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul Minnesota, presented some very helpful insights regarding the challenges in a pluralistic society to engage the laity in full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy. In his talk titled, “Stewarding the Mysteries of God: Leading the Liturgy in a Post-Modern World,” Fr. Joncas noted that “we no longer become Christian by osmosis, having been formed in families, institutions and a society immersed in Christian belief. One's religious belonging becomes a purely private matter.” Our 7-day week is now determined by economics—5 days of work and 2 days of free time. Church becomes a choice, in some cases an interference to one's free time.

In light of this reckoning, Fr. Joncas presented the four worldviews, as posited by sociologist Walter Truett Anderson, that are shaping our people in what is truth for them, how one goes about finding truth, and how one recognizes truth.

In the Social Traditional or Classicist Worldview, truth is found in the mores, sacred texts and wisdom of one's own tradition. It is the worldview of Christendom, where truth is found in the heritage of Western civilization, where reality is mediated by common sense.

In the Scientific-Rational or Modernist Worldview, the world of common sense is left behind for the world of theory. The hard sciences produce truth and all else is opinion. Its goal is to produce understanding of and mastery over the physical world.

The Neo-Romantic or Existential-Expressionist Worldview finds truth in harmony with nature/spiritual exploration and disciplined introspection of the inner self.

The Post-Modern or Social Ironist Worldview sees truth as socially constructed. Truth is whatever is true within specific contexts, and the postmodern ironist seeks to accommodate himself or herself to the needs of specific situations.

Noting that the people in our pews and those we are seeking to evangelize adhere to one or several of these worldviews, Fr. Joncas frames five areas in liturgy that are contemporary challenges in light of them.

1) "Without biblical literacy, understanding liturgical texts and gestures will be impoverished if not impossible." For the traditionalist, the bible contains the universal narrative and moral code; for modernists, the bible is remnants of ancient civilization; for neo-romantic, it is a code for spiritual experience, no more than the sacred writings or stories passed down of any other spiritual tradition; for the Post-Modern, the bible reflects historical experience and truth of a certain people in a certain time.

2) "Liturgical translations should be characterized by a kind of language which is easily understandable, yet which respects the beauty and spirit of its origins." For the traditionalist, liturgical language is sacred and meant to be archaic; for the modernist, it should be accurately intelligible; for the neo romantic, it should be poetic/inspirational; for the post-modern, it should be playful and lighthearted.

3) Regarding liturgical preaching, Fr. Joncas cites a number of challenges: the absence of significant models of liturgical preaching; the purpose of the homily and/or the authority of the cleric to preach is contested; the influence of mass media on homiletic style; and, the cross-generational and cross-cultural aspects of the assembly. For the traditionalist preaching is a confirmation of their worldview and values; for the modernist it is an educational lecture to deepen understanding; for the neo-romantic it offers spiritual witness in order to deepen piety; and for the post-modern it is to provide a "parabolic subversion" where assumptions of the world are turned upside down.

4) The challenges to the liturgical arts in a disembodied, virtual world are: lack of clarity of the purpose of liturgical arts; the artists lack of interest in liturgical constraints, the lack of resources in worshipping communities; and, contested notions of beauty. For the traditionalist, art is a portal to the transcendent; the modernist sees non-cognitive elements as meant to be overcome; the neo-romantic sees art as a manifestation of personal interiority; and the post-modern sees art as whatever you can get away with.

5) Regarding liturgical inculturation in a pluralistic world, the challenges are divisions in liturgical assemblies on linguistic, ethnic, generational, ideological and/or economic grounds. For the traditionalist, liturgical inculturation maintains and develops the received culture; for the modernist, it imposes the ‘enlightened’ culture on the other cultures; for the neo-romantic, it grafts the new culture into the receiving culture; and for the post-modern, it is formed into a “bricolage.”

In the midst of these challenges and these worldviews, priests and liturgists need to find ways to best draw each and every person into full, conscious and active participation in the Mass.

NFPC President’s report

In his NFPC President’s Report, Fr. Tony Cutcher, a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, expressed his hope and the hope of the NFPC Board to renew the mission and effectiveness of the NFPC. He highlighted the new Mission Statement:

The National Federation of Priests’ Councils serves the communion, brotherhood and solidarity of bishops, presbyterates and priests. Flowing from our mission statement we can discern these Vision Statements:

- *We gather bishops, presbyterates and priests for communion, brotherhood and solidarity.*
- *We build bridges.*
- *We provide models for communion, brotherhood and solidarity.*
- *We are solution-focused and affirming of each other in the shared priesthood of Jesus Christ.*

Recalling the number of times in the past history of the NFPC the organization has adapted their focus on the issues of the time, he emphasized that now is the time to focus on the value of a multicultural church, a greater appreciation of the Eucharist and building a better relationship with the USCCB. With that, the NFPC will deliberately focus on the following areas: Priests and Bishops in Communion; enhancing Personnel Board Review tools for clergy; continued support of focus on wages, retirement and taxes for priests; and Catholic Leadership 360°.

He also emphasized that the NFPC will continue to support the expansion of the Priest Labor Initiative in order to engage more priests across the country in a network to support union and non-union workers.

Dr. Arturo Chavez focuses on the gifts and challenges of Hispanic ministry

“Hispanics now comprise 35% of the Catholic population in the United States. That is why we must, as a Church, pay special attention to building intercultural competence in our pastoral ministry.” This was the challenge/invitation set forth by Dr. Arturo Chavez in a presentation titled “Ministry con Corazón—The Beat of a Different Culture.” Dr. Chavez is President and Chief Executive Officer of Mexican American Catholic College (MACC) in San Antonio. “In addition,” Dr. Chavez stated, “Hispanic Catholics comprise more than half of US Catholics under the age of 25.

He highlighted a number of challenges faced in Hispanic ministry identified by the USCCB: Proselytism of Hispanic Catholics—almost half of Hispanic evangelicals are former Catholics; The growth of the Hispanic population and the impact of fewer priests; the need for more continuity in ministry; a continued multicultural model that promotes a one-size-fits-all approach to ministry; the need for a diversity of ministry models serving youth and young adults; the need for more consistent ministry models; the complexity of the Hispanic population by age, country of origin, and newness to the US; limited access to leadership positions; and, limited resources and low educational attainment.

Thus there is a great need for pastoral leaders to develop an intercultural competence. We need to frame issues of diversity theologically in terms of the church's identity and its mission to evangelize. First and foremost, we must ask the question, "Am I willing to open my heart to the other and experience conversion—and from there participate in building community and solidarity?" He went on to state, "Culture and faith are gifts from our ancestors and should be regarded with reverence and respect."

In explaining the levels of culture, Dr. Chavez used the example of an iceberg. Above the water we witness and often give attention and tolerance to cultural behavior, dress and customs; but below the surface we struggle with the dimensions of culture reflected in attitudes, values, mindsets, thought patterns, perceptions and myths. "We get caught up in defensiveness when confronted with a different culture. You are different, so you are bad. It's okay for you to be different, but I am better."

In church settings, it can be reflected in situations where the predominant group holds that a certain parish event belongs to them, with the inference that it's always been done that way. This can also result in Hispanics trying to assimilate by leaving their culture behind, resulting in a "less-than" self-deprecating attitude. We can also minimize our differences as not important. "I don't see you as Hispanic" may imply that there is a relationship that has been built, but also deny the other person the cultural identity they treasure.

"Overall we need to build a greater acceptance in behavior and values, focusing on integration rather than assimilation. And it must be done in a spirit of hospitality, reconciliation and common mission," Dr. Chavez concluded.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory gives "Reasons of Hope"

"Something beyond our imagination is thinkable and able to be realized only with God's grace." These words offered both hope and inspiration as Most Reverend Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Atlanta, guided the assembly of priests in a reflection titled "Reasons for Hope." "Above all else," Archbishop Gregory began, "we, as priests, must be men of hope."

Citing his own experience of conversion to the Catholic faith at a young age through the inspiration and example of two Catholic priests, Archbishop Gregory emphasized the great opportunity we have in influencing the future trajectory of the lives of so many. In a society that no longer sees the church as an unquestioned moral voice because of media portrayals of the priesthood in a misanthropic light, there is the tendency toward fright and confusion. "Yet we cannot be men of despair. To be men of hope is to embrace a confident expectation that God's will indeed be made manifest in our midst. It is to live each day with patient endurance, to look always to God who is the sole source of hope."

Archbishop Gregory noted a number of ways that bishops and priests can frustrate that hope. He stated that he knows many bishops who take their mistakes, those times that they have unintentionally or intentionally hurt a priest, to the sacrament of reconciliation. The bishops are fully aware that their relationship with priests has been unalterably changed by the sexual abuse crisis. Yet there is no bishop who wants to hear that the morale among their priests is low.

He also pointed out that priests can be brutal to one another. He has seen or heard too often harsh words and hurtful actions inflicted on a priest by brother priests. Priests can be mean-spirited to one another; we can lock ourselves into categories, not allowing for the possibility that someone has changed or can change from a mistake they made years ago. "We need to give each other the room to

surprise one another with our expressions of God's grace made manifest through us." We need to be kind to one another, for example, to not separate ourselves into John Paul II priests and John XXIII priests, but to claim our identity as "priests of Jesus Christ, who predates these two saints by a few millennia."

"Bishops and priests must be men of hope. In a world where people are eager for an encounter with the eternal, with the transcendent, with God, where many are alienated from organized religion, we need to be in the midst of the people, being bearers of hope and love. We must take heart daily in Christ's promise to remain with us always; that must be the source of our hope!"

John Allen, Jr. describes Pope Francis as the "Pope of Mercy"

The Convocation ended on a very hopeful note as John Allen, Jr., associate editor of the *Boston Globe*, offered a reflection titled, "The Pope of Mercy: Pillars of the Francis Revolution." As a Catholic himself, Mr. Allen expressed his deep gratitude for the ministry of priests.

Citing the recent canonization of SS. Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II, he noted that this was indeed a first in the history of the church, a gathering of four popes and a both/and solution to indicate this as an opportunity for unity in the Church, beyond the politics of left and right.

Mr. Allen indicated that Pope Francis has a 90% approval rating in the United States and great popularity throughout the world. "The cardinals knew they were electing a man of the poor and a fine administrator; what they didn't realize was that they would be electing a "rock star." And despite some criticisms of particular moments in this Pope's reign, the cardinals have appreciated that the conversations in the media have shifted away from other problems in the church and focused on the inviting words and actions of the Pope."

He indicated that each of the last three popes has had a theme that has framed their pontificate. For Pope John Paul II, it was "Be not afraid." For Pope Benedict XVI, it was "Reason and Faith." For Pope Francis, it is "The Lord never tires of forgiving." In his first parish visit as Bishop of Rome, he arrived early before the Mass to tell the pastor that he wanted to hear confessions. In every action he calls for all of us to help everyone taste, feel and breathe in mercy from us. The Pope calls this moment a "kairos of mercy," a privileged moment of God's grace to be made manifest.

Mr. Allen sees this as a remarkable missionary moment in the church. "The question is: now that the world is looking at us, what are they going to see? We have two plausible trajectories: we can continue our tendency to debate and infighting, parsing every word from Pope Francis; or, when the outside world looks at us, will they witness a community working to achieve unity in order to heal the wounds of the world?"

As far as current events in Rome, Mr. Allen noted that the group of eight cardinals charged with the reorganizing of the Roman Curia will likely downsize the curia and create a Moderator of the Curia similar to the role in diocese. Also, in regard to finances, the Pope has established a Council on the Economy with 8 Cardinals and 7 laypersons, all with equal vote, plus creating a Secretariat of the Economy.

Regarding the Vatican response to the sex abuse crisis, the deliberations of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, led by Cardinal Sean O'Malley with 8 lay people, including 4 women, one who is a survivor of clerical sexual abuse, will have three challenges: 1) Doing a better job of communicating to the world the significant progress the Church has made in regard to the protection

of children and support of victims and their families; 2) Promoting a global response on the issues of clerical sexual abuse, noting that there are still some areas where punitive measures are not in place; and, 3) Accountability at the episcopal level for bishops who fail to adhere to the norms set by the church for reporting and holding accountable clerics and other church personnel accused of abuse.

Mr. Allen also said that the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the Family is and will be a great focus of Francis. Of particular interest is how the Synod, and subsequently the Pope, will address the call for greater pastoral care for divorced and remarried Catholics. “The Pope has a great desire to extend mercy, but also highly values the collegial nature of the church, and so will pay close attention to the insights and opinions of his bishops.”

In closing, Mr. Allen said that it is clear that the Pope is not going to change church dogma and teaching. Yet because the world is clear on this, he is promoting the importance of mercy in implementing those teachings and dogma. “He is not changing the lyrics, but the music of the church.”

Touchstone and Mandatum Award recipients

At a dinner held at the Atlanta Chancery, the NFPC presented awards to two great contributors to the life of priests and the church. Dr. Mary Jo Moran, SPHR, Executive Director of the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators since 2005, received the NFPC Mandatum Award, presented annually to an individual or organization whose service in the Gospel of Jesus Christ exemplifies the purpose and goals of the federation.

The NFPC annually gives the Touchstone Award to a Catholic priest “whose service in the Gospel of Jesus Christ exemplifies the purposes and goals of the Federation.” The 2014 recipient was Fr. Jan Michael Joncas, Fr. Joncas is internationally renowned as a composer, lecturer, liturgist and mentor to priests and seminarians. [See earlier remarks about Fr. Joncas.]

Priest-Labor Initiative meets

The Convocation again offered the opportunity for priests to learn about the Priest/Labor Initiative, housed by NFPC under the direction of Fr. Clete Kiley. Over 50 priests have been trained nationwide thus far to support local efforts in accompaniment and empowerment of workers who are being discriminated against in the workplace, subject to wage theft and unhealthy work conditions. Participants discussed ways to identify the needs of workers in their parishes and communities in order to let them know that they have a place to go, that the church will walk with them as they face discrimination and abuse in their workplaces. Of special note are the growing number of Worker Centers where workers can go for free assistance from lawyers who can help them in recouping their wage losses and address working conditions. Clergy can play a role in this outreach as well, standing with workers as they peaceably confront their employers, and walking with them as they organize with other workers to address work issues and possible unionization. The NFPC is working with Interfaith Worker Justice and a number of unions to support priests in this training.

Prepared by Fr. Larry Dowling, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and pastor of St. Agatha Parish