

## A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE LAITY

### *The Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern*

Vatican II, perhaps the third or fourth most significant event in Christian church history, met from 1963 to 1965.

Sometime in the mid-1970s Catholic activists in Chicago (and elsewhere) began to be troubled by the implementation of Vatican II in the U.S., especially the lack of implementation around the Council's document *Gaudium et Spes, The Church in the Modern World*.

About this time the Association of Chicago Priests was meeting to discuss the laity. It struck Msgr. Dan Cantwell that priests should not be holding meetings about the laity, in the absence of any laity. And so, as he had done many times before, Cantwell gathered a group of people. The result of their discussions was the December 1977 *A Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern*.

The message of the *Declaration* was simple, but as it turned out, quite profound. Some aspects of Vatican II--liturgical changes, parish governance, etc.--were, the signers of the *Declaration* acknowledged, being well implemented. The central Vatican II message--that the people of God live their vocations in the everyday world of science, industry, commerce, politics, around the home, on the postal route, in the classroom, and the emergency room--was nowhere in sight.

The signers of the *Declaration* included several well-known Chicago priests. In addition to Cantwell, they included pastors

Fr. John Flavin and Fr. (later Bishop) Raymond Goedert, also

Fr. Vince Giese, Fr. Tom Ventura, Fr. Jack Shea and the young

Fr. Jack Wall. The signers also included some women religious, including Sr. Agnes Cunningham

of St. Mary of the Lake Seminary and  
Sr. Carol Frances Jegen at Mundelein College.

Among the signers were many of the lay leaders associated with Catholic causes and movements in the 1930s, 40s and 50s: Russ Barta, Patty Crowley, Ed Marciniak, Franklin McMahon, Larry Ragan, Faustin Pipal and others.

Also on the list were some younger activists: several labor officials, people from the Chicago newspapers, health professionals, a lawyer and a judge, some business people, a postal worker and a student--50 people in all.

The reaction to the *Declaration* was electrifying. It was reprinted in numerous papers and journals, including in Europe and Australia. By one count, there were one million reprints made of the *Declaration*. It was translated into Spanish and was the object of a conference in Mexico. *Commonweal* magazine devoted an entire issue to commentary. So did the *National Catholic Reporter* newspaper.

In order to handle all the mail being generated, an office was opened at Mundelein College, early in 1978--that office was called "The National Center for the Laity."

Soon thereafter a major conference was held at Notre Dame, the proceedings of which were published in *Challenge To The Laity* edited by Russ Barta. That book, which contains the complete text of the *Declaration*, sold 15,000 copies.

Although one of the purposes of the National Center for the Laity is to keep alive the *Declaration* and its discussion of world/church/faith, the *Declaration* has a life of its own today. (By the way, the *Declaration*, apart from its content, suggests a model for writing future church

pastoral letters--at a minimum its genesis suggests that meetings on the laity should include lay participants.)

### *Early Years at Mundelein College*

The National Center suddenly went into limbo. A few issues of INITIATIVES appeared, the last in July 1979. Stephanie Certain, Larry Ragan, Larry Suffredin, Bill Speilberger and a couple of others kept the National Center from extinction.

Then in September 1980, Sr. Carol Frances Jegen introduced Russ Barta to one of her graduate students at Mundelein College: Bill Droel. Barta's talk about Catholic social action led Droel to wonder why nothing was happening. He urged Barta to revive the National Center.

At the same time, perhaps by divine coincidence, pressure to revive the National Center was coming from other corners. In 1982 Frank Butler and FADICA held a symposium on "The Catholic Laity Today," during which the *Declaration* was discussed. FADICA reprinted the *Declaration* in a book. The following year John McDermott gave a talk at Chicago Theological Seminary in which he quoted the *Declaration* extensively. Bishop James Hoffman of Toledo, chair of the bishops' committee on the laity, did the same in a Brooklyn talk. So did Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw.

About that time Archbishop Joseph Bernardin was making his way to the Cincinnati airport on route to Chicago. He paused to give a talk on "The Future of the Church." Sure enough, he quoted the *Declaration*. Bernardin landed at O'Hare and gave a series of five inaugural talks in Chicago. Again, he referred to the *Declaration*.

All Barta needed at this moment was a call from the pope! Low and behold John Paul II issued *Laborem Exercens, On People's Work*. The pontiff didn't quote the *Declaration* exactly,

but for Barta the similarity of themes between the encyclical and Barta's own thinking was too much of a coincidence.

In Spring of 1983, Greg Pierce met with Bill Droel in Newport, where over breakfast they hatched a bold plan to revive the National Center. Enshrined in a letter, dated May 1, 1983, the two outlined a strategy to interest a new generation in the message of Vatican II and raise \$50,000--both within a year.

Droel and Pierce did indeed give the National Center a second life. A tax-exempt status was obtained. Its board was expanded. Over 150 issues of INITIATIVES have been published; a major conference was held in September 1986 at the Midland Hotel in anticipation of the World Synod on the Laity; a conference for young adults was held in May, 1989; three more conferences were held in the 1990s; three smaller gatherings have been held this year; other books have been published, retreats held, and contacts around the country have been made.

### ***Why the National Center Continues***

The National Center has, for over 25 years, been at the cutting edge of an issue which is quietly challenging the U.S. church and which will soon dominate its agenda.... The issue is Catholic identity.

What does it mean to be a Catholic in the United States in the 21st century? Where is the church? Is the church really the people of God working as homemakers, accountants, business leaders, teachers? Or is the church only inside the parish buildings? How is the church present to the world? Only in episcopal pronouncements and in programs designed and staffed by Church employees? Or is the church present to the world in the daily work of a Republican Congresswomen, a Democrat state representatives, liberal union officials, conservative union

officials, conservative business leaders, liberal business leaders, lawyers, postal workers, homemakers?

Put it another way, how useful will this thing called *Catholicism* be to the children of Baby Boomers?

The National Center is virtually the sole carrier in the U.S. of the Vatican II idea that the church is the people of God at work inside the world. In recent years the vocation of the laity to the world, especially through daily work, was almost totally overlooked by parishes, diocesan agencies, Catholic schools, and even by the bishops' committee on the laity.

Today, thanks in part to the nudging of the National Center, a small number of people, parishes and agencies are taking the initiative, as called for by Vatican II.

The National Center has had other, somewhat intangible, influences. The National Center, for example, had a direct impact on the U.S. bishops' letter on economic justice. Through its booklet, *Ethical Guidelines for a Religious Institution Confronted by a Union* by Ed Marciniak (which has sold 30,000 copies), and through stories in INITIATIVES the National Center strengthened the section of the bishops' letter that deals with practicing justice before preaching justice, especially in regard to just treatment for Church employees. The National Center also influenced the sections of that letter that refer to subsidiarity and mediating structures.

The National Center can take some indirect credit for the small number of parishes that make the faith/work connection a priority: Old St. Patrick's in Chicago, St. Olaf's in Minneapolis, St. Patrick/St. Anthony in Hartford, St. Martha's in Akron, a Newman Center here or there. Some diocesan departments are now open to the National Center's idea. The National Center receives scores of inquiries each month and regular speaking requests.

The message of the National Center, however, has not become mainstream. The ordinary

Catholic is hard pressed to regularly apply his or her faith to questions of ethics, meaning and justice on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood. That's the challenge for the years ahead.

### ***The Role of the National Center***

To keep the message of Vatican II alive the National Center must continue to:

- Agitate Church agencies and parish leaders when they focus too narrowly on the internal needs of the church.
- Witness to the principles of Catholic social teaching, especially when Church institutions are not practicing what they preach.
- Support those parish leaders and workaday Christians who apply their faith to issues in the workplace and the community.
- Network those churches, Newman centers, schools and departments that design and implement programs that help Christians connect their faith and their daily life.
- Invite young adults to study and apply Catholic social teaching as a way to give meaning to their work, their culture and their family life.
- Sponsor or highlight scholarship and popular writing on the theology of work and culture.