

# Catholics Called to Action

James Finn

Sponsored by the Catholic bishops of the United States and attended by Catholics from around the country, the Detroit "Call to Action" conference provides an excellent opportunity to take the pulse of American Catholicism, to see what it thinks of itself and where it thinks it is going. What does it say when it addresses itself collectively and democratically to questions of economic justice, divorced Catholics and remarriage, liturgy, racism and discrimination, nuclear weapons systems, abortion, amnesty, family and community values, the poor and the oppressed, financial responsibility within the church—what does it say when it addresses itself to these and the myriad other issues with which it is involved? What, after the last decade of turmoil, are we to make of American Catholicism today?

The conference, held for three days in October, was immediately hailed as an historic event by some of the participants, and one of the bishops called its execution a minor miracle. There is some basis for that claim. The national assembly of the United States Catholic Church was unprecedented in the history of American Catholicism. In its planning (two years in preparation), in its scope (from person to humankind), in its bold aspirations (to form a five-year plan of action for justice), in its attempt to gather disparate voices into one resounding chorus there has been nothing like it. During the proceedings a number of delegates expressed amazed delight at what was taking place and that they were part of it. "To see all these people voting on such hard issues—to see cardinals and lay people, black, hispanic, ethnic, radicals and right-wingers, theologians and activists... well, I just never thought I'd live to see this in my church. Great. It's wonderful." That almost bewildered statement was repeated with variation by many participants.

But joy at the conference was not unrestrained, nor all criticism muted. A leading theologian, Father Charles Curran, called the conference a disaster and questioned whether a group so constructed could speak adequately on issues such as disarmament. Some members of the hierarchy almost immediately expressed nervous anxiety

over the direction the conference seemed to have taken. And they were, of course, almost immediately asked to respond to those questions the media regard as most important, i.e., the sexy and the sensational. They were first asked, therefore, what they thought of the ordination of women, of contraception, of the ERA, etc.

But there is no way to evaluate the Detroit conference as an isolated, discrete event. It is part of an ongoing process. Not just the two-year Bicentennial project that led up to it, but that process of deep change within Catholicism, the starting point of which, for the sake of convenience, we can establish as Vatican Council II (1962-65). Nothing comes from nothing, of course, and what Vatican II delivered to the world was a set of beliefs, ideas, and practices that had long been gestating. But the Council itself was the greatest single educational event of the century, and only those who regard education lightly will dismiss the implications of that event. More than ten years have passed since the end of that Council, and Catholicism is still trying to cope with the tidal waves it set in motion. There is, as yet, no settled opinion, no consensus on what inspiring or destructive impulses it released. The only agreement is that things are not as they were, and never will be.

From among the major concepts that found expression in the Council, permeated much that flowed from it, and had significant effect on the Bicentennial project of the bishops, I select two. First is the relation between the sacred and the secular, and second is the changed view that the "human race" now has of history and its institutions. The distinction between the sacred and the secular, sharply made, provided the basis for much that has been valuable in Catholic thought and practice. The distinction provided the theoretical basis for the gradual withdrawal of churchly control from large areas of life—intellectual, political, and artistic—that were afterward properly defined as autonomous. It provided the basis for the relation between the laity and those ordained to religious life within the Church, directing each to their proper function. It provided the basis for distinguishing between the love of God and the love of man. There are still those who cling to that distinction and impose it sharply even as they attempt to point out where, in light of Vatican II, the Church is headed. But

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others heard the Council to say that since the Incarnation, since Christ came into this world, nothing, no person can be purely secular. One can distinguish only to unite. The love of God cannot be separated from the love of man.

Put thus, briefly and abstractly, the newer emphasis scarcely seems unsettling. But it has proven to be. Particularly when it has been conjoined with other formulations of the Council. For example, *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, one of the principal documents of the Council, stated that "The human race has passed from a rather static conception of reality to a more dynamic, revolutionary one." Innocuous enough. But it challenged—and shattered—the ahistorical orthodoxy to which many in the Church appealed when they attempted to explain from whence they had derived purportedly unchanging rules and formulae. The term conservative, when applied to or claimed by these people, is, in a very real sense, a misnomer, for they wished to establish as final and absolute what has been historically conditioned. They ignored the dictum that in order to conserve one must reform. But others have not, and in what they understood to be the spirit of the Council they brought their own reforming spirit to bear on a number of institutions, including the Church. They have also attempted to follow the direction provided by the Council when it asserted that "It is the task of the entire People of God to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the divine Word." But before hearing and distinguishing the "voices of our age" they often attempted to be part of those voices. That attempt was clearly evident through the 1960's and early 1970's, and some of those voices were heard at the Detroit conference.

To account, at least partially, for what those voices were saying, and saying loudly, at Detroit, I will select as paradigmatic the unequal and noncoordinate issues of artificial contraception and *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical condemning it; Catholic radicals as typified by the Berrigans; United States power and its relation to the Third World; questions of war and modern weapons.

Almost ten years after *Humanae Vitae* was promulgated it remains a major point of division within the Church. To review what is possibly oppressively familiar: After long personal meditation and years of consultation Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical that opposed his judgment to that of other Christian churches, to the direction of much contemporary Catholic theology, to the desire expressed not long before by many bishops meeting in a Synod, to the nearly unanimous position of the 1967 lay congress, and to the majority statement of the commission he had himself appointed to study the question. The issue of birth control is not negligible in the world today, but I agree with the view of an American sociologist, Andrew Greeley, who conjectured that "The Pope was forced to issue the encyclical not because there were obvious and overwhelming agreements against contraception but rather because his vision of the role of the papacy and of the nature of Christian faith left him little choice." Greeley further suggested that if most

Catholics assented to the encyclical, the authority of the papacy "as the protector of the Faith" would be reasserted; if they rejected the teaching, the papacy would probably decline into a long eclipse.

*Humanae Vitae* and its prohibitions have not had a happy or victorious history. The encyclical has been either criticized or ignored by significant segments of the Catholic community in many countries, including the U.S. It is a mark of the allegiance and sobriety of the people who engaged in the Detroit process that when engaged with this issue they formulated—in a section not on family life but on personhood—the following recommendation:

That the Church in the United States acknowledge that it is living in a state of conflict and anguish arising from tension between the common understanding of Church teaching on contraception and the current practices of many Catholics.... The American Bishops should use their present pastoral leadership to affirm more clearly the right and responsibility of married people to form their own consciences and to discern what is morally appropriate within the context of their marriage in view of historical Church teaching including *Humanae Vitae*....

That is neither direct opposition to the encyclical and Paul's papal authority nor yet simple assent. It treads a middle course between the two and between the extreme historical consequences posited by Greeley. It leaves open the possibility that this question, like others animated by the Council, is too sudden, too heavy, for many Church leaders, that it places upon a single generation of Church leaders psychological burdens that in leisurely times were spread over many decades and several generations. It may be that a new generation of Church leaders, up to and including the Pope, will be required before the issue of birth control ceases to be a matter of

#### SOME FACTS ABOUT THE CONFERENCE, "CALL TO ACTION"

- It was held in Cobo Hall, Detroit, October 20-24, 1976.
- It was the culmination of more than two years' planning as part of the Catholic Bishops' Bicentennial project, "Liberty and Justice for All."
- It was attended by 1,340 delegates from across the country, representatives of 150 out of 170 Catholic dioceses and 100 national Catholic organizations.
- It was composed, with rough approximation, of 60 per cent laity; 28 per cent clergy; 12 per cent bishops. Of the total group, approximately 39 per cent were women. There were over 1,000 observers.
- It was structured along eight themes: church; ethnicity and race; neighborhood; family; personhood; work; nationhood; humankind.
- It had an agenda and working papers that flowed from six earlier regional meetings, many parish meetings, and over 800,000 responses from parishes.
- From the conference recommendations will be developed for consideration by the Conference of Catholic Bishops when they meet in Chicago, May, 1977.

—J.F.

dispute within the Church. In the meantime, the Detroit conference has dealt with the controverted issue in a responsible and mature manner. This same kind of responsibility was shown in the Detroit recommendations to support family values, to extend pastoral care to divorced Catholics, and to support the *Bishops Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*.

It must be acknowledged that the issue of artificial birth control is regarded as a trivial issue by most Americans who are not Catholic. And further acknowledged that it is so regarded by some who are—Daniel and Philip Berrigan, for example. Daniel has lumped it together with celibacy and parochial schools in referring to “the internal questions of the Catholic community,” which “retarded questions” hold little interest for him or his brother.

TOP PRIORITIES ROUGHLY INDICATED BY THE WORKING PAPERS OF THE “CALL TO ACTION” CONFERENCE

1. Provide opportunities for family activities/sharing.
2. Provide continuing religious education opportunities for adults.
3. Assist the aging.
4. Share the resources of the church with the poor.
5. Aid youth.
6. Improve self-image and self-respect.
7. Church leaders should exert influence on political life.
8. Develop church as community.
9. Develop services to meet the needs of the poor.
10. Develop effective communication of church teaching.
11. Seek better understanding of roles of men and women.
12. Promote ongoing dialogue among bishops, priests, and lay people.
13. Church should share resources and facilities with the poor.
14. Meet personal and spiritual needs.
15. Give help on communication between parents and children.
16. Church should support equal opportunity for women in society.
17. Women's role in the church should be expanded.
18. Improve homilies.
19. Church leaders should promote political participation by laity.
20. Make a real commitment to neighborhood.
21. Promote marriage and family life education/organizations.
22. Simplify life-style as a Christian community.
23. Pressure the media to uphold value system.
24. Educate toward global justice.

—Compiled by Frank V. Manning, STD

As those who followed the brothers' journey through the last decades know, the Berrigans did train their observations and judgments on larger issues. They wished to change “the stance of the Church before mankind”; they wished to turn the might of America around. In their assault upon the American warmaking machinery directed at Vietnam, the Berrigans made a forceful case and gathered a number of disciples. They brought to their self-imposed tasks a religious reading that released others from inhibitions that had previously

restrained them from questioning governmental authority. And the Berrigans provided the assurance, buttressed by teachings of Vatican II, that this pursuit of justice, this opposition to evil, was at once a civic and a religious undertaking.

But the Berrigans went further. They wished to reject not only the evils of the Vietnam war but to crush the seeds that gave it birth. They found those seeds in America, in the system it has helped develop and of which it is a major part. In 1970 Daniel wrote: “The crisis is of such enormous extent and depth, that all solutions based on the sanity and health and recoverability of current structures are quickly proven wrong, untimely, unmanageable, bureaucratically infected: the same old kettle of fish, stinking worse than ever in the boiling juices of changes.” Two years later and less metaphorically, he said: “American civilization is ugly, menacing and corrupt beyond remedy.”

Too extreme to gain a sympathetic hearing? Too little rational analysis to support such harsh judgments? Not at all. In spite of reservations that were expressed about the means he chose, Dan Berrigan was generally attended to and supported, not only by his disciples, but by respected Christian and secular journalists. Three recent books concerned with American Catholicism close on notes appreciative of the Berrigans. Probably the most distinguished of contemporary religion journalists, the late John Cogley, wrote on the last page of his *Catholic America*: “The brothers Berrigan... may have provided an example of the duty that before long will fall upon all Catholics who do not give up on either their country or their faith.”

Garry Wills, the trackless wonder of Catholic journalists—he rarely indicates what paths he followed in the past and which brought him to his present stance—wrote this encomium of Daniel Berrigan toward the end of *Bare Ruined Choirs*: “He stands for roots instead of rockets, tradition over progress, tragedy over arrogance, weakness over power, gospel over Caesar.” And near the end of his book, *The Renewal of American Catholicism*, David J. O'Brien, who played a major role in the Detroit process, wrote of the Berrigans: “Their honesty, integrity and vision, and their willingness to place their lives in jeopardy, make them authentic spokesmen for a thoroughly Christian response to the contemporary crisis.”

Although the Berrigans were not at Detroit, some of their supporters were, and *their* sentiments can be found in a number of the recommendations, particularly those dealing with global justice and peace. But many tributaries flowed into some of the more incisive and severe judgments on the international economic order, multinational corporations, and modern weapons of war, and that to which the Berrigans contributed was joined by others. One of the major tributaries is the revolutionary impulse from Latin America, itself fed by a number of different perceptions: the discovery that Marx can provide acceptable tools of analysis for sociologists, economists, and even theologians within the Church; an intense awareness of injustices imposed by an oligarchic system; a view of the international economic order that perceives the United States as the principal exploiter, the

Third World as the exploited; a critical view of free-enterprise capitalism and a benign view of socialism; a determination that, in the name of justice, the injunctions of the Gospel, Vatican II, and selected papal encyclicals, the Church will be made an active agent in the liberation of man from the more oppressive economic and social structures.

Taken full strength, that heady mixture has rattled some dedicated Catholics into near incoherence. For example, when the former missionaries Thomas and Marjorie Melville attempted to explain why they turned from traditional missionary work in Latin America to working for a better social order through political activism, they wrote:

The rights and wrongs of such a struggle don't often come in white and black; there are many hues of gray involved. Yet, in our experience, the Catholic Church and the United States government have inevitably failed to recognize this.

That unmodified, black-and-white charge is articulated with much more intellectual sophistication, depth, and nuance by those American Catholics who draw inspiration from the "Christians for Socialism" of Latin America, the Catholic Marxists of Europe, and America's own radical critics.

Their voices were heard and clashed with others during the Bicentennial hearings and at the Detroit conference, but so persuasive or so voluble were they that in the final recommendations there are few positive words about capitalism (even modified), free enterprise, or multinational corporations. For many—not all—who heavily influenced the recommendations these terms have immediately negative connotations. They are assumed to stand in the way of a new and desired politico-economic order in which exploitation will be overcome and equality will reign.

**I**t is on issues dealing with war and peace, however, that the delegates drastically modified the admirable Working Paper on Humankind that was developed from previous meetings and that served as the basis for group consultation. The final recommendations that emerged on some questions of military power and security can be described, depending upon one's own stance, in various ways: extremist, utopian, pacifist, or prophetic. They condemn not only the threatened use of nuclear weapons but their production and possession. They call not only for a careful control of but a halt to the sale or transfer of arms overseas. They call the U.S. to convert to a peace-based economy.

As someone who is skeptical, not only that these recommendations fail to reflect the views of the larger Catholic community, but even the considered views of the majority who voted for them, I have been forced ruefully to reflect and meditate on how and why they were passed. Possibly my own skepticism is unjustified. Rejecting that as unlikely (but keeping the option open), I am led to think that they were passed because of some weaknesses in the structure of the conference coupled with truly generous impulses of the delegates. The

weaknesses of the conference—apparent elsewhere as well as in the Section on Humankind—was the very limited time allotted to extremely complex issues and the unexpected ease with which some delegates dismissed the Working Papers that had been prepared with considerable effort and care. (I have recalled more than once Paul Ramsey's ironic observation on meetings of the National Council of Churches during which they acted on numerous resolutions, condemnations, and exhortations. Rather than congratulating the participants at these meetings for the breadth of their interests and their productivity, their friends, Ramsey suggested, should have expressed concern about their short range of attention and the shallowness of their deliberations.)

Another weakness was that delegates were attracted quite naturally to those sections with which they were most concerned, and in some instances they simply outnumbered the other delegates. What I have termed the weakness of generosity occurred in the plenary session. Those who worked hard in the sections devoted to their special interests expected the assembled delegates to take that work seriously and not damage it by amendments and qualifications. And they extended that same courtesy to the delegates who worked in other sections. Thus, without a suggestion of conspiracy or insidious lobbying, some extreme statements were readily accepted by the plenary group and now form the official statement of the Detroit conference. Without demeaning, I hope, the integrity of those who worked to formulate and pass the extreme recommendations on disarmament—with no word about U.S. security needs or obligations to our allies—I believe this is the process that allowed them to be accepted by many who would normally not subscribe to them. But even if my analysis is correct, it does not change one significant fact: There is, in American Catholicism today, a questioning of American military power that did not exist ten or fifteen years ago.

**D**o these weaknesses, therefore, undermine the accomplishments of the "Call to Action" conference, reducing it to one more wordy meeting? I think not. The Detroit conference does not represent the views of the entire Catholic community—but it was not expected to do so by those who planned it. It must be considered and evaluated along with the regional hearings, the volumes of testimony they produced from organizations and the grass roots, the Working Papers, and, probably most important, what further develops from this ongoing process.

The conference reflects, in some way, the mood of the country. It was sometimes divided and confused, yet it expressed, not the malaise and feelings of hopelessness that are frequently attributed to us as a people these days, but a desire to do better and a belief that it is possible. And many of the issues that most deeply concerned the delegates are those that concern the rest of the country: questions of equal opportunity and just rewards; of women's rights and minority discrimination; of amnesty, capital punishment, and the defense budget. They were more interested in what Daniel Berrigan calls

“retarded questions” than in systemic criticisms of world order or in strictly theological questions. Like other Americans they were most interested in what most immediately touched them, what affected them and their well-being. But there was also a desire to reach out to others whose deprivations, pain, and grief they could acknowledge.

Many of the delegates were openly critical of the institutional church and the leadership it provided in this country. Yet they repeatedly urged that the bishops do this, form that committee, act on another proposal, etc. These proposals can be easily caricatured: If the bishops were to accept even a bare majority of them, they would have an agenda that would readily dispose of their time, energy, and finances for the next decade. It is fairer, I think, to see these recommendations as a recognition on the part of the delegates that they still respect the institutional church they so readily criticize, and that they hope to work in and with it so that it will become a more active agent for justice in our society. The conference also indicates that many Catholics intend to work for greater justice through nonreligious agencies. Often, admittedly, they also expect they will be the recipients of that greater justice. Fair enough.

The delegates showed an interest and an energy throughout the Bicentennial project that was impressive. The Detroit conference belies the observation of Arthur M. Schlesinger, who said at a symposium conducted under other religious auspices, that “for better or worse, religious faith hardly seems a living option for most of us today.... God is a base to be touched ceremoniously once a week, not a live, constant supreme presence.” As for the churches, they belong with other institutions of our society; “terrible, all corrupt... the churches are not different.” I assume that when Mr. Schlesinger said “most of us” he was referring not to most of the world or even to most Americans but to those representatives of the declining Enlightenment whose tone he has so well captured in his statement. The delegates at Detroit may not be the leaven of this society, but they are not to be caught under the loose net of Mr. Schlesinger’s observation. They do provide a base for religiously motivated action in this country, and they spoke, as far as one can determine, out of a live religious faith. They want not only to pray for the world, but to change it.

Religiously motivated, fine! But what if they are motivated to fly off in different directions, or into the empyrean heights of a longed-for utopia? A good question, Mr. Scepticus. The answer is easy to give if not to implement: The Bicentennial project of the Bishops Conference revealed that there remain deep divisions within the church, that these divisions will persist and be harmful if they are not recognized and confronted, that if confronted they may yet be joined in productive tension, that new and sometimes younger leaders are reformulating not only the answers but the questions. And the standing ovation given to John Cardinal Dearden at Detroit also made very clear that many Catholics respond to real leadership within the institutional church. For as Chairman of the Bishops’ Committee for the Bicentennial, this intelligent, wise, far-sighted, and patient man, responsible for many of the best things to come out of the Detroit conference, is well aware of the deficiencies and has the determination to see

## SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DETROIT CONFERENCE

### *Church*

Church authorities should be financially responsible to the people; due process should be instituted in the church; American bishops should request the Pope to allow ordination of women and married men; sexist language should be expunged from church documents.

### *Ethnicity and Race*

There should be a program to overcome the Catholic community’s mockery of church teachings on race and ethnicity. The hierarchy should be more open to ethnic, racial, and special cultural groups.

### *Humankind*

Condemn and resist the production, possession, proliferation, and threatened use of nuclear weapons. Sale or transfer of arms overseas should be halted. Challenge U.S. and corporate involvement in Third and Fourth worlds. Establish an office in liaison with the U.N. The Catholic community should simplify its life-style.

### *Nationhood*

Make national commitment to a policy of peace and programs of disarmament. Support the Equal Rights Amendment. Sustain the momentum of this Detroit conference. Unconditional amnesty should be extended to all Vietnam war resisters.

### *Neighborhood*

Develop strong, small Eucharistic communities. Decisions to close schools should involve the community. Each diocese should make a self-study of how its resources are used in community development.

### *Personhood*

Women and unordained men should be allowed to preach. Capital punishment should be ended. Pastoral care should be extended to homosexuals. Bishops should affirm the right and responsibility of married Catholics to form their own consciences about contraception.

### *Work*

“Right to Work” laws should be repealed. Use church investments to influence social justice in the Third World. The church should expose multinational interests in Latin America.  
—J.F.

that what is promising in the overall process has the opportunity to flourish and bear fruit.

Catholics across the country must learn how to talk with each other across the divides that separate them, to find out what has happened since they have tried to cope both with Vatican II and the upheavals in this country. Detroit made clear that, speaking from different vantage points, they frequently talked past each other, frustrating the best of intentions.

The dialogue of which Detroit was part must, therefore, be continued. The Catholic bishops will play a major part in this dialogue when they next meet to review and evaluate the Bicentennial project. The opportunity and challenge at this point is theirs. But the Detroit conference was a “Call to Action,” and the call was not only to the bishops.