

Over thirty delegates from progressive Catholic organisations in six countries (Canada, the USA, Austria, England, Germany, the Netherlands) met in conference in Vienna 6-9 November to discuss the 'crisis in ministry' in the RC Church. Speakers at the conference included Dr André Lascaris, one of the authors of the controversial Dutch document *Church and Ministry*, and Monsignor Helmut Schüller, former Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Vienna, one of the founders of a group of 300 Viennese priests supporting 'the vocation of all the baptised to joint responsibility and shared decision-taking.'

The conference was also addressed by Professor Leonard Swidler of Temple University in Philadelphia, Dr William Manseau, current president of CORPUS, one of the largest groupings of married Catholic priests in the USA, and Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, one of the five women RC bishops.

The conference had been called by a federation of married Catholic priests in North America and Europe. It re-named itself the 'International Federation for a Renewed Christian Ministry' and intends to work with all groups extending the boundaries of lay and ordained ministry in the Catholic Church, including a number of married priests associations, the Women's Ordination Conference in the USA and the growing RC Women Priests movement of irregularly but validly ordained women.

The new federation adopted a constitution reflecting its broader aims and elected an English layman, Simon Bryden-Brook of the UK group Catholics for a Changing Church, as its first President.

An Appeal from Vienna

The International Federation for a Renewed Catholic Ministry, gathered in Vienna 6-9 November 2008 calls for a renewal of ministry as the first step towards "A Future for God's People".

The crisis in ministry, a severe shortage of ordained ministers and suitable candidates has accelerated the Church crisis where large numbers abandon their Catholic heritage and where the character of credible Church authority has been undermined. Indeed the very misuse of authority in rejecting a fully inclusive ministry has created the ministerial crisis. There is no lack of callings and gifts in the Catholic community at large; a lack of vision and courage keeps us from following where the Spirit is leading us.

Efforts to address the ministerial crisis by merging or closing parishes have deprived the Catholic community of the Eucharist and pastoral care which are at the very heart of what it means to be Catholic.

The Catholic Church in the past adapted to the 'signs of the times' as it created a ministry of Jerusalem elders and Corinthians charismatics, of Roman imperial scholars and feudal monastic communities, of missionaries to the world and prophets of social justice, of university-trained pastors and ministers of daily life.

It is time now to create anew a ministry that is inclusive in gender and marital status most especially but also a ministry that is truly collegial. Without inclusivity and collegiality as taught by Vatican II, the ministry of the Church cannot become a sacrament or sign of human rights and gospel norms. Without those rights and norms, the authority of the Church cannot be viable.

It is indeed time to welcome ministerial candidates whose callings and gifts have enriched our Church. They must be welcomed, however, not only by Church leaders but, beforehand, by the communities they serve, communities which select them and receive them.

The long delay in the reform and renewal of ministry has undermined the life of the Church and its witness to Christ. The current crisis calls for an interim and alternative approach. Until the ministry is officially made inclusive and collegial, we offer as our charter the *Church and Ministry* statement of the Dominicans of the Netherlands:

On the basis of the priority of the People of God over the hierarchy – stated explicitly during the Second Vatican Council – a diocesan bishop may be expected to confirm such a choice after due consultation by the laying on of hands. If a bishop should refuse such a confirmation or 'ordination' on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as obligatory celibacy, parishes may be confident that they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine.

We urge parishes to act in this way with a great amount of self-confidence and courage. It is to be hoped that, stimulated also by such a relatively new practice, bishops may in the future live up to their commitment to serve and eventually confirm the leaders of local communities in their office.

This appeal of our Congress emerges from our love of Christ and Church, from the New Testament and Vatican II, from our sense of Tradition and the signs of the times, from the hope we continue to have for the Catholic community we have served all our lives.

Vienna, 8 November 2008