

AMERICAN CATHOLIC COUNCIL

<http://americancatholiccouncil.org/>

January 25, 2009

*"It is not that the Gospel has changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better. Those who have lived as long as I have were faced with new tasks in the social order at the start of the century; those who, like me, were twenty years in the East and eight in France, were enabled to compare different cultures and traditions, and know that **the moment has come to discern the signs of the times**, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead."*

Pope John XXIII, on his deathbed

DECLARATION FOR REFORM AND RENEWAL

After years of dialogue and experience with the often-unrealized reforms set in motion by the Second Vatican Council, the American Catholic Council, a coalition of representatives of organizations, communities and individuals, calls for a representative assembly of the Catholic Church in the United States to consider the state of our Church.

We do this because the Signs of the Times reveal a serious deterioration in the life of the Catholic Church in our country: We see:

- Closed parishes, broken communities, and unavailable sacraments.
- Sexually-abused children and young people and ineffective clerical response to correct this institutional sin.
- Dwindling financial support and widespread fiscal mismanagement.
- Paternalistic, monarchical leadership that is often unresponsive, repressive, and ineffective.
- A seriously compromised social justice mission--because internal institutional justice is lacking.
- Catholics abandoning the Church with demoralizing frequency.
- A community starved for a spirituality that fits our modern lives, consistent with our maturity, experience and education.

We acknowledge co-responsibility for these conditions--for no community can be governed without its implicit or explicit consent. We "consent" with financial and personal support, with participation, or, often, with passivity.

We do not challenge the faith we were given or the essential beliefs of our creeds and councils. We do know that this faith is not tied to the governance structure of any one historical period or culture. We seek a Church in which all the baptized have an effective voice in decision-making and a ministry worthy of their calling.

We are wise enough to know that we shall never have a perfect Church. We do not, however, want to be far from a Church that is free and honest, even if it is one in which we are called at times to uncomfortable accountability and responsibility.

We seek a Church that is inclusive, compassionate, trustworthy, and representative.

We seek a Church that actively listens to the Spirit in its people and that worships and evangelizes in the fullness of that inspiration.

We seek a Church that addresses the spiritual hunger of all Catholics, including marginalized and former Catholics.

We seek to multiply the bread of the Eucharist so that a malnourished Catholic Community can encounter Christ with all the healing power of his sacramental presence through the preservation of parish community and a radically inclusive theology of ministry.

We seek reform of the governing structures in our Church so that they reflect the better aspects of the American experience: a democratic spirit, concern for human rights, freedom of speech and assembly, and a tradition of participation and representation.

AND WE SEEK TO DO THIS NOW.

We take as our norm the Gospel and the life-giving elements in our Tradition, especially the earliest history of our Church and the renaissance promised by the Second Vatican Council. We are guided, furthermore, by the wisdom gained from decades of intensive reform and renewal efforts in the post-Vatican II Church of the United States.

Jesus called all to the Reign of God without reservation. The ministry and table fellowship of Jesus found place for the marginalized and the previously uninvited, for the adversaries and the advocates, for friends and religious leaders, for the poor and the rich, for the searching and for those who do not search, for women and men.

The disciples of Christ became a New Testament community of Churches, democratic in believing the Spirit was given to all. These communities were never perfect. St. Paul tells us there was factionalism as well as harmony and confusion as well as clarity. Nonetheless, these communities proved themselves reliable and became the embodiment of the living Christ. They selected their leaders and held them accountable. They recognized a wide diversity of charisms and ministries, validated not by one person or office, but by the community at large.

The inclusive, collegial model lasted for centuries. It led to a global Church, the conversion of the Roman Empire, and the first Ecumenical Councils. It created a spiritual and sacramental Tradition that continues to enrich our lives. A Church from below proved itself trustworthy with the Gospel and responsive to the creative Spirit.

We summon those who share our vision or question it, those who want the Church to be more than it is now, and those who yearn for the renewed and reformed Church that the Gospel, Vatican II and the Signs of our Times require.

In the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, we are conscious that we are “only the workers, not the Master Builder.” But, together we can fashion a charter of rights and an expansive ministry, a social justice agenda, and an inclusive community.

With God’s help and with the Spirit at work in all of us, we can become Christians, such that the world will marvel at our love for one another and at the service we give the human family. We do not despair of this possibility. If you do not, join us.