

## Permanent Committee On Priestly Life And Ministry?

# A Case For The Negative

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

At their annual meeting next week, the American Bishops will be asked to vote on a proposal to form a permanent committee and secretariat on priestly life and ministry, to take the place of the present Ad Hoc Committee chaired by Archbishop Hannan of New Orleans. Their Excellencies should approach this decision with extreme care. On paper, an affirmative vote by the Bishops will do nothing more than approve the general idea of having such a committee and staff. It will not determine which Bishops will form the committee, who the staff experts are to be, or what policies the committee should pursue. But the real situation goes far beyond what appears on paper, just as the proverbial nose under the tent always turns out to be part of a whole camel. And just as the farthest extreme from the camel's harmless, little nose is his huge rear end, so the extremity behind the Bishops' small recommendation is Fr. Frank Bonnike.

Writing in the November issue of *Priests U.S.A.*, the house organ of the National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC), Fr. Bonnike has laid out a comprehensive blueprint for the permanent committee including both general goals and detailed job descriptions for its staff members. All of the usual NFPC radicalism is there. For instance, in talking about the "Advocacy" function of the proposed committee, Bonnike proposes: "1.) To advocate certain causes in ministry, and to make their desires known to the total NCCB membership, e.g. underrepresentation of women, browns and blacks in ministry.

"2.) To develop and communicate programs of service, and to make any needs and programs known to the priests' councils, the NCCB and the U.S. government, e.g. justice and peace issues such as poverty, racial discrimination and disarmament."

And concerning planning for experimental ministries, Bonnike proposes: "To study our fast changing environment, and to identify needs for experimental ministries — their descriptions, funding, support system, staffing, critiquing, and supervision — and to assist dioceses in developing concepts and models of new and experimental ministries, e.g. non-stipendiary ministries."

But lest anyone should think that Fr. Bonnike's vision is narrowly sacerdotal, he rises to the tasks of papacy and prophecy in proposing: "To provide a setting in which Bishops, scholars, and representative Church leaders can examine imaginatively the nature and future of religion and the potential future directions of the Church in our culture. This would include concerns such as its structures, its spiritual renewal, its educational and leadership needs, its future programs."

Now if nothing is to be determined in the foreseeable future except the very existence of this permanent committee, what business is it of Frank Bonnike's to be planning its household operations? Is he feathering a bureaucratic bed for his friends? Is he perhaps, just perhaps making a bid to become head of the future staff? Nothing could be more fitting.

For there is no doubt that the very idea of the permanent committee at least in the present context, is an NFPC idea. The Hannan Ad Hoc Committee Report, which is the

document on whose recommendations concretely the Bishops will be voting, is visibly an NFPC document, at least in substance. There is an intimate correlation between the Hannan proposals (evaluation of priests, elections of Bishops, due process, etc.) and Bonnike's own blueprint. The dominance which the NFPC has wielded over the Ad Hoc Committee from the very beginning, moreover, is dramatically portrayed in a front-page photograph in the October issue of *Priests U.S.A.*: It is a picture of the Ad Hoc committee and its consultants. Frank Bonnike sits at the left hand of Archbishop Hannan as four more officers or past officers of the NFPC stare out from the ranks. Five key NFPC figures out of a total of 13 (minus the Bishops), a total which includes at least four more close sympathizers, like the notorious Fr. Ray Goedert, past president of the Canon Law Society of America.

The Ad Hoc Committee Staff claims to be representative, yet where is there a single representative of the large and active priests' groups which oppose the NFPC? After the famous (and hysterical) "Moment of Truth" declaration, issued by the NFPC last year, does anyone seriously claim that this shrill pressure group represents the real attitudes of the American clergy? And if it is well known that the NFPC is a radical fringe, why on earth have these men been given such prominence in the Bishops' own counsels? Clearly the scheme to establish a permanent committee is just a means to perpetuate their lopsided predominance for years to come

(and precisely at the time when the NFPC itself, due to defections and financial trouble, can no longer maintain its predominance by any other means).

One could quote many more recommendations both from the Hannan report and from the Bonnike blueprint which are extremely ill-advised. But in a very real way, it is the medium of both documents which is the message. In this case the medium is dense, bureaucratic jargon. Both documents read like memos from a Federal Bureau of Programs and Planning re multi-level inter-office coordination of systems management, to coin a phrase. What both documents offer us, and what the whole career of the NFPC has offered us, is exactly the suffocating bureaucratic regimentation of all pastoral action which Cardinal Wright decried in his now-famous *Intervention*. In America, as in Spain, the chief victims of such regimentation will be the Bishops themselves.

Clearly, this is the time for the American Hierarchy to take bold action that will return initiative to the proper episcopal hands. This is the time to decide that the national conference, which has no juridical or collegial authority, is not the place for a permanent committee on priestly life and ministry. Then it will be up to the man who does have juridical authority, the local ordinary, to act as guide and father for his own priests, whose needs he knows far better than a clique of dissidents on Wabash Avenue in Chicago.