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CALL TO ACTION 1976 CELEBRATION

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CALL TO ACTION PROCESS

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I've had an interesting travel day today, but I'm glad to be here; and I'm really honored to be here back in Detroit, where I visited, when we did the Call to Action so long ago; and I want to really thank people for inviting me, but also thank you for your fidelity to this cause of renewal and reform in our Church.

I'm just going to try to go back through the history. Some others can talk about where things stand today, but I'll go back through a little bit of the story of the Call to Action. But it was really a terrific process, and it was a moment for me, that experience of working with this process – with the hearings, with the National Bishop's staff, with Cardinal Dearden, and then, with the Call to Action event itself. It really has sustained my faith, and my love, and my hope for the Church all these years; and I still go back to the faces of people I met in those days to remind me of what the Church can be, and what, in fact, for all it's faults, it continues to be, for so many people around the world. And when I meet with people like yourselves, who've been faithful to this cause, I'm enormously grateful.

So, let me talk a little bit about what the Call to Action process and event was about. On October 21, 1976, some twenty five hundred Catholic Bishops, priests, religious, and lay people assembled here in Detroit for the final conference of a two year process that climaxed in the event that was called the Call to Action. For three days they prayed, worshipped and debated a host of subjects ranging from religious vocations and Catholic education, to nuclear disarmament. In the end they voted approval of 30 resolutions, containing over 180 recommendations,[1/] to be presented to the nation's bishops. How did that happen?

Leading to the Conference

Well, the deep background, if we had time to talk about it, I think, would have at least three parts:

- One of course is Vatican II – and especially that part of Vatican II that had to do with the notion that the Church is the whole community of the faithful – that term "The People of God." One of the findings of one of our committee's in preparation for the bi-centennial process was that that phrase "The People of God", more than any other image or concept from the Vatican Council, had become well-known by the people of the Church across the country; and in the process they tended to take that understanding of the Church, as the whole community of the faithful, as a norm by which to judge what was going on, and to make recommendations for change. So the Church was involved in trying to translate that term: the Church as a whole community of the People of God, the Body of Christ, into practical strategies and practical structures and reforms. And I'll come back to that throughout.

- The second was the challenge of the 1960s. The Council came to us amidst the time when we were going through the War in Vietnam, the civil rights crises, the terrible riots in our cities, the terrible violence, and that whole decade from the assassination of John Kennedy through to 1973 and the end of the Vietnam War, and the Roe versus Wade abortion decision. That period of the '60s, the Council came to us and the whole Church, including our bishops, came more and more to see the social mission of the Church – the vision of the Church in service to the whole human family as absolutely essential to its life, and vitality, and integrity.

- And those two pieces together, I think – that sense of the Church as a whole community of faith – has got to find ways to work together in order to take on the challenge that Vatican II had presented to be a Church, and not for itself, not simply as the ordinary means of salvation to get its members to heaven, but to be the Body of Christ, to be the presence of Christ in the world, and serving the human family at a moment, as John XXIII had told us in "Pacem in Terris" – a moment of great crises that he focused on with the Cuban Missile crisis, and so much else.

  So the bi-centennial program of the American bishops came out, I think, of the conjunction of those two larger, kind of streams, of change; and it had a concrete background in experiments that were going on across the country in shared responsibility, in trying to reform and renew structures of consultation within the Church, so we could learn how to work better together.

My bishop wrote a history of the Church in Syracuse, New York, and loved doing it. And the bishop of that diocese, like so many, was a kind of hard-nosed guy, as John Dearden was, and was converted by the Council. In his first pastoral letter that he wrote, when the Council was over, was entitled, "We Are the Church;" and in my book about the history, I said a lot of people were kind of surprised at that, because they had tended to think of the Church so much in terms of the hierarchy and the bishops. And of course he said that we are the Church in the midst of 1965, of serious racial conflict in the city, and the growing problem in Vietnam. So he actually initiated, as bishops across the country did, various kinds of experiments in shared responsibility and cooperation – trying to find the forms by which we could really come together, act together, and work together.

Richard Mc Brien, right about that time – I have a funny story but I won't tell now – but in one of his books about the Council, the young Richard Mc Brien said this – and I think it has a lot to do with what the Call to Action experience was about – he said, the Church renewal and reform was deducible to two principle goals:

- First, to bring the organizational operations of the Church into conformity, and place them at the service of the historical goals or mission of the Church – so to change the structures, the organizational operation, in ways to be consonant with and at the service of the Church's mission.

- And second, to draw upon the resources of the whole Church in fulfillment of the mission by motivating the general membership to accept and pursue the Church's goals.

This challenge, he said, can happen only if the membership is allowed and encouraged to participate actively in the various processes through which these goals are identified and achieved. Anybody in a voluntary organization in American life knows that's true. If you want your organization to be in service to its goals and mission, and you want the membership vocalized, then you have to enable and encourage the membership to be involved in the process by which those goals are established and approved. And it seems to me that at its best, the Church was struggling towards trying to find a way to do that in those days that followed the Council.

Now the initiation came from the national level, from the level of the new United States Catholic Conference and National Catholic Bishops. And there, you could see a whole series of experiments in shared responsibility. For one thing, when they established the new body after the Council in '66, the NCCB, they established a national advisory council, composed of priests, religious and lay people, chosen from around the country, who would meet prior to each bishops' meeting and offer advice on the bishops' agenda It's one of the great secrets of American Catholic life that advisory council still exists; that Cardinal Dearden and the early bishops made a lot of use of that advisory council; and it is actually the place where the initiation of the bi-centennial program began. But, in addition, you could see other examples.

In '71 when there was to be a synod at the Vatican on the priesthood, the bishops launched a very well financed set of research studies on the American priesthood, and engaged in a long processes of consultation with their priests – through priest senates locally, and through the newly established National Federation of Priest Councils, to develop an agenda for themselves as they went to Rome. Rome said they didn't want to hear some pieces of that agenda. The number one item on it, from the priests of the country,

was the reconsideration of clerical celibacy. When the bishops said that, Rome said celibacy would not be on the agenda of the synod for consideration at the time.

But they did that consultation process. They needed to have a catechetical directory, because there was a lot of conflict about religious education. So they launched a consultative process with education committees, and boards, and education leaders around the country to develop that. They were to write a letter on moral values in 1976; and the background of that, of course, was *Humanae Vitae* and the protests against it. So they went to a lot of trouble to solicit the participation, the reflection, the consultation of theologians, of pastors, of priests, and of pastoral councils at the local level where there were diocesan pastoral councils. The emphasis apostolic delegate at the period when this process took place was Archbishop John Gideau from Belgium. And John Gideau was at the Call to Action, and was very comfortable with it. In fact, during the three days, he roamed the floor and was very encouraging to people, telling them how impressed he was by the candor, the sincerity, and the love for the Church that people brought to the meeting.

Little remembered is that Archbishop Gideau also launched a process of more consultation with local dioceses when there was a vacancy for the replacement of bishops. Working with the Canon Law Society, they were experimenting with trying to get a way in which diocese facing the need for a new bishop could develop a profile of diocesan needs and the various constituent proofs, diocesan pastoral councils, priest senates and religious could participate in suggesting nominees, or at least a profile of who the nominees should be.

So consultation was in the air. It happened at Medellin in 1968. Some of you will remember the Appalachian Pastoral. It was under preparation while all this was going on in the Call to Action process, and the Appalachian Pastoral Letter had had hearings through the Appalachian region that produced this remarkable poetic, kind of free verse, pastoral letter in 1976. So there was a lot of interest in consultation.

The National Advisory Council, in fact, had taken under consideration the idea perhaps of having a national pastoral council. You had pastoral councils in parish level, in diocesan pastoral councils. Maybe there should be a national pastoral council, as some other countries have felt. And when they met to discuss that – they had three different meetings about it around the country – they concluded that the United States wasn't ready for that yet. There was too much tension, and we hadn't had enough consultative processes. And at one of their meetings, Sister Mary Gustineo, one of the movers and shakers, a sister of Notre Dame from the Boston area Emanuel College, she suggested that perhaps the bi-centennial era would be a moment when you could have an experiment in a national consultation around the theme of liberty and justice for all, around the bi-centennial theme. So the original idea really came from Sister Mary Gustineo and it was enthusiastically received by members of the National Advisory Council, and they passed it on to the bishops in 1973. So that's some of the background. It wasn't the first. It was certainly the largest and most ambitious experiment in consultation aimed at developing a culture and some structures of shared responsibility in the Church at every level.

So in 1973 the bishops decided to devote their bi-centennial celebration to the theme of justice in the world, and in 1976, to have some kind of conference that would mark the Catholic Church as honoring the American bi-centennial. And John Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia, who was president of the bishops' conference, asked Cardinal Dearden, the past president, if he would serve as chairman of a bi-centennial committee, which he did. Dearden chaired that committee that had three sub-committees:

- One sub-committee on history, chaired by Archbishop Maderos, later Cardinal Maderos of Boston, developed some historical materials. They did some stuff about historical tours, and pilgrimages, and some of the sites in Maryland area, and that sort of thing.

- There was a committee on liturgy that was chaired by Bishop Edward McCarthy of Phoenix, who later moved to Miami, and they developed a lot of servant guides and liturgical kind of packages for people to use during bi-centennial period.

But their work folded into a surprise. Cardinal Krol decided to hold a National Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, and the liturgy committee of the bi-centennial worked with him on that Eucharistic Congress. Now this is a little sideline, but some of you will remember that that Eucharistic Congress was held in the summer of 1976, three months before the bi-centennial conference in Detroit, and I can assure you that those of us who were working on the committee were really nervous that Krol was going to have a Eucharistic Congress, and we were going to have a justice conference, and those two would be seen as competing with each other. And there was a lot of anxiety about that, but you'll remember that the Eucharistic Congress turned out to be a magnificent event, and it focused on the hungers of the human spirit, the human family, and it focused on the question of world hunger, and it brought all kinds of people from all parts of the world, including Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day, and Cesar Chavez, and all kinds of people who were concerned about hunger, to be speakers and to pray about, really, the social mission of the Church – the Church's response to the hunger and anguish and suffering of people in the world.

So it turned out not to be a competitor, but in a lots of ways, to really be very much in the spirit of what we later came to call the Call to Action experience, of placing the Church at the service of the human family. I like to tell people that, because you will recall that we recently had a year of the Eucharist in the midst of the clerical sex abuse crises, and very rarely in the materials did you hear the Eucharist hooked up to the hungers of the human family, and our draw towards our being Eucharist food for our brothers and sisters. I've heard wonderful talks by sisters and priests on that subject, but they didn't work their way really into the catechetical or homiletic materials distributed by the bishops during this last year of the Eucharist.

- Then the third sub-committee on Dearden's committee was the committee on the justice conference. It was chaired by Archbishop Bernadine. When he became president of the bishops conference succeeding Cardinal Krol, Archbishop Peter Garrrity of Newark took over the chairmanship of the committee. Another little sidelight is that my daughter is in a wonderful parish in Maine whose pastor had been Bishop Garrity's secretary, when he was bishop of Portland. And about six weeks ago, I got invited up there for dinner with Archbishop Garrity, who is today the oldest living bishop in the United States. He's 96 years old, and he's smart as a whip; and I brought him all these pictures from the Call to Action, and he could remember everybody's face, and who so many of these people were. It was wonderful, and he loved the experience of the Call to Action, and he's always been a supporter and friend of the Call to Action legacy.

  Well, Bernardin chaired that committee in the beginning, and they weren't sure what to do; but they named people to the committee, and through ecclesiastical politics of the day, I got on that committee, which was wonderful. As they prepared for the first meeting of the justice conference committee, Father Brian Hare, who staffed and led the Department of Social Development and World Peace for the bishops, wrote a letter to Bishop Jim Rausch, who was the general secretary of the United States Catholic Conference; and that letter really became the starting point for consideration of the bi-centennial process.

  And what Brian suggested is that we try to make that event in '76 a kind of watershed event; he called it like Medellin – a watershed event, he said, between two different understandings of the nature and mission of the Church, one before and one after, as Medellin had been for the Latin American Church. And Brian suggested a process that would have, first of all, the preparation by staff and experts of a set of documents, of papers, on the social teaching of the Church applied to some concrete questions of trade, and arms, and race, and poverty.

  Those papers would then be distributed for regional meetings around the country, at which selected people – wasn't defined who would get there – would go to these regional meetings, and there would be a kind of feedback process to those papers. Then the results of that would go to a national conference, which would be a lot of Church leaders, and especially a lot of experts, who would boil that down into a five year plan for the bishops to act on the Church's social position, and the promise of the Church's commitment to work for liberty and justice for all. So that was the project that was presented to the committee when it first met.

There were a number of assumptions that became clear in the committee's early work:

- One was that whatever process you used had to be a little more bottom up than Brian's process had suggested – that there had to be a little bit more participation of the people of the Church in it, based on the common sense of that Richard Mc Brian idea that, if you're going to get people involved, you have to have them have a sense that they're in on the process of the definition of goals.

- Secondly, it would have to be open to questions of justice in the Church, if you were going to take on questions of justice in the world. And the committee kind of said that very much in the beginning.

- And then thirdly, it would have to overcome what, already then in 1973, was a good deal of skepticism in the American Church about the credibility of the bishops, and their willingness to deliver on the premise of a five year plan. Will we participate? Well, maybe not, because we've grown rather cynical about our bishops and their leadership of the American Church.

  Well that was a mood. I wouldn't say it was anywhere as bad as it is today, but it was there, and it's background of course was "Humanae Vitae," and the background was – for many of our priests – was the 1971 Synod, when after this intense consultation, which they had become so involved in, their most important item on the agenda was taken off the table; and the American bishops did not protest over it's being removed from the table.

  So there was a lot of cynicism and skepticism around that had to be overcome. And I tell you that, because at that time and place, many of us look back on the Call to Action, and think we worked so hard to overcome the skepticism and the touch of cynicism that a lot our people felt, but we maybe overdid it, because people were so excited that, by the Call to Action, it really worked, than when they came in. We have data that showed they came in with reservations, not thinking the bishops really listened, and then came out of it with this great sense that we were going to turn the Church around – probably expectations that outran what could be delivered.

So, at the early meetings of the committee, those kinds of factors fed in to the decisions that were made. And one of the people who really constructed the process and had a tremendous influence on it was Michael Novak. Michael Novak made two major suggestions that informed the process.

- One was, he said, "Why don't we go all the way, and really ask the people what they think should be the Church's agenda for liberty and justice for all?" He even used the phrase, "A people's agenda," to set before the bishops in the form of advice. And that became a real direction – to have an open invitation to all the people of the Church in the United States to participate in a process of advising the bishops on this.

- And then when it came time to say how are we going to organize our presentation and materials for them to respond to, he suggested that instead of issues, as Brian has suggested: *trade, race, arms, poverty*, and that sort of thing, that we think in terms of organisms, he called them. So we ended up with those organisms: *personhood, neighborhood, family, ethnicity and race, church, nationhood* and *humankind;* and later on, we added *work*, after some people had asked for it.

So they became the organizing vehicle. And the decision was actually to have two programs. The liberty and justice for all program – this program of national consultation – and then the Call to Action Conference, which would climax that liberty and justice for all process. A handbook was prepared that had questions for people to respond to. And it was published, and received some controversy when it came out – I'll come back to it maybe at some other point – but it did go out. This was the text that people were to use for their conversations and their solicitation of advice. The request for participation went to all the nation's dioceses. It went to all the national Catholic organizations listed in the National Catechetical Directory. The organizations tended not to participate very well, though they did, as we'll see in a minute, said they

would get to the Call to Action Conference. But those organizations did not respond a lot. Sometimes their boards or at their national convention, they would have a workshop and prepare some feedback sheets to send in, in response to the questions in here; but they didn't become good vehicles for organizing people locally for full participation. The diocese and parish participation was uneven, as you might expect, then as now; that is, it was really up to each bishop to determine the degree of the participation locally in the process, and that often depended in part upon how strong the social ministry component was in that local diocese. But there were diocese like Hartford and Richmond and Denver that had parish consultations, well organized around the organisms – regional discussions of the results of the recommendations from the parishes, and then actually diocesan conventions, to come up with a diocesan agenda to have their diocesan delegation carry to the Call to Action event, and prepared themselves very well for that. So, over 800,000 people, we know, participated, in one way or another, in the grass roots consultation that produced 800,000 feedback sheets that we worked out a way of processing.

So, organizations and hearings were the most dramatic form of consultation. It was the bishops holding regional hearings around the country. And the hearings were intended to be a kind of visual demonstration of what the bishops were saying they wanted to do – to listen to what people had to say before they were to respond and develop this five year plan.

Regional Meetings Leading to Detroit

So the first hearing was held in Washington on national and international questions. And a lot of experts came; and a lot of invited guests from Catholic organizations came. Some guests from overseas came to talk quite eloquently about the problems of the Church in other countries. But there wasn't a lot of popular participation. A lot of Catholic activists in the area were upset by the fact that they weren't allowed to testify, or their local groups weren't allowed to testify. So, after that, the hearings were really opened up, and each local hearing had at least some time set apart for anybody who wanted to come forward and testify to do so. And I think we were able to do that. In Minnesota I remember everybody had three minutes; and it went on for much of the day, people coming up for their three minute presentations; but the hearings were opened up. The testimony was sometimes formal papers delivered, sometimes informal, but passionate.

The record of each hearing was kept open for a month afterwards for written materials to be solicited. And then all of those were printed up for consideration by the committees and the delegates to the Call to Action Conference. Well, some of you will remember some of those hearings that were held in places like Washington, at Maryknoll, on international questions, and San Antonio, Sacramento, Atlanta, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Newark, New Jersey – remarkable, remarkable events. ABC television covered the one in Newark, New Jersey – one day in an intercity black parish, one day in an Italian parish that was like an armed camp in this tough neighborhood – there was a big wall around it – and then one day in a prosperous suburban church – really the drama of the differences in the Church, with twenty-five bishops listening to testimonies from ordinary people, from organizational representatives, and at that hearing, they heard from Dorothy Day, one of my most vivid moments of all of this. They spent a day in Atlanta talking about Church issues, and then went out to Tidycreek, Georgia in southern Appalachia. I had never been in Appalachia, and heard these mountain people coming in, and talking about the faith, and what it meant to them, and their dreams for the church. There was an African-American group that came up from sugarcane country in Louisiana, and the faces of those people testifying remain vividly before me – evidence for me of how the Church, even in its most kind of conservative form, was often a way in which people sustained a sense of hope and dignity in the midst of great poverty. If any of you have ever read Robert Kohls' prize winning work on the children of poverty; he has a marvelous image in there of the impact of fundamentalist religion among poor people in southern rural towns, and how it helped sustain them and a sense of dignity. It was a whole revelation day for me in Tidycreek, Georgia.

It was just a remarkable thing; and the hearings, I thought, were dramatic evidence of a number of things – the ability of the bishops to convene people. Everybody accepts the invitation. Later we saw that in the 80s nuclear debate. Everybody comes if the bishop invites them. When they're in the listening posture, they're just simply listening to people; people's voices tend to moderate a bit. And when they are testifying to the bishop, people are hearing them right. There are really speaking to the whole church.

And the little book that was distributed for the 30th anniversary meeting last year in Milwaukee, I tell the story of, in Atlanta, watching Brian McNaught come up and testify for the new group, Dignity, about pastoral care for homosexuals. And sitting behind him is a very prim and proper lady from the military ordinariate, families of people in the military, who had just testified about their needs; and she was looking at Brian MacNaught like he was from another planet, talking about homosexuals in the Church. But as she listened, you could see that she was really intently listening to this very articulate, handsome, attractive young man, Brian McNaught. Later in the day, I saw them having lunch together; and people tell me that she came to Detroit, and she voted for the resolution to provide greater pastoral care for gay people.

For me, I've had many, many examples of how the hearing process, where people were simply presenting their experience and their needs to the bishop, but really speaking to the whole community, tended to allow for unity and diversity to be celebrated at the liturgies in these events, and also tended to say something about how authority works in the Church, and how we change our minds. How many of us have seen adults change their mind? Not very often in our lives, huh? I saw people change their minds in those hearings.

So what to do with the results of all those consultations? Well, the idea was to have a justice conference – and the justice conference be fully representative. So every diocese got to send nine delegates, with one extra delegate for every hundred thousand people over a million in population. Every organization in the National Kennedy Directory got an invitation to send one delegate. Some organizations not there listed, Dignity being among them, asked to send delegates, were denied, but they were allowed to appeal to the Credentials Committee at the Call to Action in Detroit. Nine groups did so, and the Credentials Committee admitted them – one of the little controversial pieces later on that they go into the meeting.

Coming to Detroit

How to get ready? How to get the group ready? The bishops hired Sister Margaret Cafferty from San Francisco. Don't get me going on Sister Margaret Cafferty, a magnificent, magnificent woman of enormous talent and skill. And it was her job to get everybody ready. We picked all these people to be the facilitators of small groups and large groups at the meetings; and we did it as you might organize a New York City political ticket – male, female, all kinds of groups represented. They had to be trained; and she helped train them. But, most of all, she met with diocesan delegates in regional meetings all over the country to try to empower them, encourage them, to get ready, to know what to expect, to prepare themselves at home, and to really give them a sense of empowerment, that they indeed were going to speak to the bishops about where the whole Church was going to go. She is an inspiring, empowering and amazing woman. The job was: what are you going to give them when they got there?

So they set up eight committees under those eight headings: personhood, neighborhood, all that. Each committee was chaired by a bishop. Each committee had on it people who were affected by the problems under that heading – priests, religious theologians, and the ordinary people, supposedly. I got the job of staffing those eight committees in partnership with Sr. Alice Gallen from a college in New Rochelle. It was one of the great experiences of my life.

We had these eight committees, which was chaired by a bishop. They would meet and get all this material, from the hearings, from organizations and from these 800,000 feedback sheets – the materials for their particular section. And they would read them, summarize them, offer a theological reflection on what was heard, and then offer some draft recommendations for consideration by the delegates coming to Detroit. It was a remarkable gamble, I guess you'd say, and we, as one of the pride of my life, got unanimity on seven of the eight committees. And I can tell you committee stories here all night, but it was a wonderful, wonderful experience; and the groups worked together really well. Each of them had about three extended meetings; and we came up with these resolutions to be considered in Detroit in time for the delegates to have time to work with them back home.

In Detroit

So, we came to Detroit, then, for these three days to do that job. Would it be possible to consider all these recommendations? The meeting opened with a wonderful speech by Cardinal Bernadine. I'll quote a piece of it to end my talk today. And then, people went to the eight groups; they broke into eight groups. There were 1400 delegates and about 1,000 to 1500 observers. The delegates broke into eight groups around these eight headings to consider the resolutions there. They then broke into sub-groups, within those groups, to consider each resolution. Each group had about three resolutions; so eight groups first, then three sub-groups within each of these eight. There were trained facilitators. There was a lot of debate back and forth. And they voted on amendments to the resolutions they received. When they were ready, they then sent those back to the full committee, their full, one of eight groups. And they were printed overnight and gotten ready for them when they came together as the eight groups. And then the eight groups met to consider what they had gotten from their sub-committees, and vote on what they would send to the floor for a plenary session. And those were taken off and printed up overnight. The staff worked all night printing that material.

And when they came to the floor first on Friday night, there were two groups considered; and then six in an all day marathon meeting on Saturday. The chairs of the plenary sessions, Msgr. Jack Egan and Alexis Herman – an African American activist from Atlanta, who we would later meet as Secretary of Labor in the Jimmy Carter and the Bill Clinton administration – they chaired the meeting superbly. People were allowed to offer resolutions, but there could not be extended discussion; and lots and lots and lots of votes taken, and eventually all these 180 recommendations were approved. It was a remarkable experience for everyone that was there. It wrapped up with a wonderful liturgy on the Saturday night; and it wrapped up with a speech by Dearden.

Aftermath

Well, the resolutions went to the bishops – they were meeting in November – right after; that was too quick to consider it, as really May of '77, before they were able to give full consideration. Some bishops were very excited about what had happened. Others were very frightened and upset about what happened. The publicity of the meeting was negative, that is, Archbishop Bernadine, who was chair of the whole bishops conference, expressed reservations. He said there were too many resolutions. They had had too many interest groups influence them; and when he gave his speech to lead the bishops into consideration of them in May, he said it produced polarization and division within the Church; and they would have to re-assert their role as teachers in the church. And so, even NCR, a friendly paper, featured in its first post Call to Action issue, Archbishop Bernadine's criticism, rather than the resolutions and the experience of the delegates themselves. It was a negative, critical kind of controversial thing, immediately, even in the friendly press.

One little story. We on the staff, of course, worked very hard to say this is the whole Church deliberating. It's just advice to the bishops. A lot of different groups were represented and tried to play down confrontational language. And Cardinal Dearden: we had him prepped one day at a press conference, and he got all these questions about, aren't these resolutions on birth control and ministry to gays, aren't they confronting the Vatican; aren't you thumbing your nose at the Vatican? He had beautiful ways of expressing them that were having everybody being heard; but the TV in Detroit that night, I remember sitting in my hotel that night, and the anchorwoman came on reporting on what had happened, and of course, she only emphasized birth control and homosexuality, women's ordination; and then she said, "They voted on these; they sent them to Rome; and the ball is now in the Vatican's court." We could all see Archbishop Bernadine pulling out his hair; "O Father, we are in trouble."

So it went to the bishops, and the bishops at the main meeting – I could tell some stories about that – broke up into groups, considered them, and came out with the idea that they would take a lot of them and assign them to consideration by their existing committees. The more controversial ones: some were simply ignored, some were put into the hands of the administrative committee, and never heard from again. There was a lot of disappointment, as you know, across the country; and out of that disappointment came the Call to Action movement that you have been part of.

Finally, in May 1978 they did come up with their five year plan. By that time a lot of the people had turned away. I wrote an article in NCR, and said they were able to produce a plan that was a long way from what the people had asked for; but they were able to do it at really no cost, because people had turned away from the politics of it for one reason or another. We have to remember that a lot of things did happen in the late '70's and '80's:

- A pastoral letter on racism,
- A pastoral letter on cultural pluralism celebrated by our Hispanic and Latino friends,
- And then, Bernadine's magnificent process of producing that remarkable pastoral letter on nuclear weapons,
- And on the economy of the 1980s.

So a lot of things did happen but certainly not fulfilling the promise that was there when we went through the conference.

Observations

Let me say a couple of things. There was an image of reality question, like I say. The criticism of the controversial questions was, particularly around human sexuality, women's ordination, were the ones that tended to get featured in discussions, as they have had since, and that tended to distract attention. I said, wasn't it remarkable that the first national assembly of the American Church ever held, an assembly almost all whose delegates were appointed by the bishop, passed a resolution basically calling for unilateral disarmament, for an end to the production and employment of nuclear weapons? Almost no attention was given to that except by a few bishops, who were mad at it because it went beyond the Vatican; but it got little attention from the press, because neither did a lot of the resolutions on poverty, and hunger, and human rights.

Interest groups. Cardinal Bernadine thought there was too much influence by interest groups: Marriage Encounter, Corpus, Dignity, Pax Christi, the Women's Ordination Conference. It's a little silly, the interest groups, as he called them, were working the conference. They were doing what people do in these free and open democratic meetings; and they operated by persuasion. They were talking to delegates who were bishop appointees. Sixty four percent of the delegates were paid by the bishops, on the payroll of the Church, one way or another, and they were persuasive. And they were persuasive enough to get many of their resolutions passed. And if you read the resolutions, they're not very radical. They usually called for study, or for ministry to, or for consideration of. They are not in any way abrasive, in-your-face, kind of issues.

The other side of the interest group question is the absence of interest groups, that is, that those groups weren't strong enough to influence the post Call to Action conference. The groups that had been strong in the past, the National Federation of Council, the major conference superiors of men, the major conference superiors of women; those groups were decreasingly able to be effective at the national level. Their political clout was declining, if you will, out of their own internal problems, which were preoccupying as time went on, and over the growing cynicism among many of our diocesan priests, and their loss of interest in church politics.

Extremism. Well I say: read them; because they are not very extreme, I don't think, by any of the categories we would put before them even, I don't think.

Justice, in and out of the Church. Of course, there was a lot of talk about financial accountability. There was a lot of talk about accountabilities of the process that we were involved in. They introduced a pastoral resolution, asked the bishops to set up a task force that would monitor their implementation, and come back in five years and reconsider what had been done. So there was a lot of attention to justice in the Church by the delegates; and that was certainly one of things that probably scared the committee of the bishops, and fearful of where shared responsibility would lead. Let's notice that around that question was the pastoral side, that when you ask people what was the justice question, a lot of them brought in basically pastoral questions – pastoral attention to one or another neglected group, Latinos, minorities, immigrants, gays, and even families feeling that they were not being ministered to effectively.

And Msgr. Egan had years ago warned us many years ago to never let social ministry and pastoral ministry get separated from each other. But unfortunately it looks like they had. The social ministry has become more professionalized, maybe more movement oriented. Pastoral ministry got cut up in changes, conflicts – the tensions that were developing within the Church – and they simply got separated into the different parts. And we didn't have, maybe, an effective pastoral strategy for the building of that.

Yet, I want to say that the Call to Action was a remarkable experience of Catholic solidarity, not just the Church as the People of God, but the Church as the Body of Christ – the capacity having been heard to come together. And that liturgy was really a sense of being one Church, even with people that you disagreed with.

Cardinal Krol. People always think of Cardinal Krol as a conservative, but a very different kind of conservative, that we deal with today, because Cardinal Krol is a man of considerable self-confidence. He didn't seem to have the least problem sitting there and listening to people sounding off and take votes. At one point he said at a meeting, "You can vote for it, Sister, but you're not going to get it". (Laughter) So, there was that kind of sense that he was listening – he was really listening – he was hearing what was said, and he wasn't going to let it happen. But he and Dearden were strong leaders. They had a kind of strong sense of themselves, and they weren't afraid of that kind of open debate and open dialogue that so many others were.

The nervous bishops were behind the scenes. They were pulling the sleeve of Bishop Jim Rausch and telling him, how did you ever get us into this time of trouble? It was very sad. For those of us that were there, it wasn't an experience of the People of God; it was an experience of the Body of Christ - that we are one people, and that we could come together in the remarkable liturgy. I have this marvelous quote from this one bishop, conservative bishop, from Florida who loved the liturgy. And at the prayers of the faithful, this young seventeen year old comes up, whose family was migrant workers, and she offers on behalf of the whole community the prayers of the faithful; and he says that's what the conference was about. That's the future and that's what the conference was suppose to be about; and so for all of us that were there, it was a moment of joy, and a sense of real inclusiveness in the Body of Christ.

The people who felt outside felt welcome. Forty percent of the delegates were women, who were getting there, more than was usually present. The Latinos were the most effective interest group there. They organized; they were – as people came in the door to register anybody that even looked or sounded Hispanic, they took them by the arm, they took them in for a drink, and introduced them to other people. They organized caucuses within all the eight groups and they got a lot accomplished. They loved the Call to Action. Their organizations afterwards were just delighted with the results, and offered the bishops to help in any way they could.

We learned something about dialogue and authority. At the moment of the Call to Action, Archbishop Bernadine was still very much a churchman, still kind of preoccupied with the power structure of the Church, and how things were going to move. And another person like that was young and upcoming Bishop Bernard Law from Cape Girardeau-Springfield – and I could tell you some stories. He chaired one of our committees, and it was one that we didn't get unanimity on. But, he was very nice and very kind; but he simply didn't get it; he didn't get this process.

But I often think, if you took the careers of those two men after the Call to Action, Bernadine and Law, how different they were. And what made that difference? What brought Law to disgrace, and brought Bernadine, in the last days of his life, to probably have more genuine authority in his diocese, the city of Chicago, than probably any bishop in the history of the United States? People would have followed him, even into Lake Michigan, in those last months of his life. So, there is a story to be told there, and I think the story is that Cardinal Bernadine came to learn that, if you open your heart, and you open yourself, and trust the people, that the results will lead you to having more authority, and not less. If you let the pastoral side of yourself grow, and let go a bit of the organizational side, wonderful, wonderful things can happen. So it was a moment of trust.

In the politics of the Church Rome was not going to allow national episcopal conferences to become strong; shared responsibility and hierarchical authority were to go in a different direction. Experience was not to be a factor in determining moral teaching, which is what so many people were asking for. Social ministry and mission would still be important, but somewhat disconnected from the pastoral and church life.

But there are big issues at stake, and that the politics of the Church in the next few years, things were not go quite in the direction that we hoped for. But we are still here, and the other groups are out there, called the Voice of the Faithful, and we are still here, and what we worked for is still the common sense of things: that this Church, if it is to be a Church and service to the human family, that in moments of crises it's got to learn to be a Church together, and to learn how to talk to each other, and learn how to act together.

Conclusion

So, I'm just going to read you, kind of the farewell lines from Cardinal Dearden at the opening speech of the Call to Action, and what we were trying to do. Remember what I said about shared responsibility, and how to translate people in the Body of Christ into concrete organizational changes, in order that we can place ourselves and our resources at the service of the Church's mission.

Here's what Cardinal Dearden said, and I'll close with this. "All of us in this hall" he said "are against racism, and war, and hypocrisy, and violence. All of us are committed to the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of peace, and justice, and love, and brotherhood and sisterhood. The tough part is translating all that into action; translating into a community of faith that conducts worship, and prayer, and education, and works of charity, and social service; translating it into a moral position on questions of public significance; having an impact on the process of legislation of public policy, because it is there that the basic work of justice is done in modern society. Both the pastoral task of building up the Church and the political task of building the world involve choices – concrete and specific choices about how to spend our money, make our decisions, allocate our resources, and direct our personal and collective allocation of time, treasure and talent."

And here is what I really like, "None of us knows for sure how best to do these things. None of us can be certain that our program of reform is exactly what the Lord intends for us to do; so we have no choice if we are to be a community of faith and freedom except to meet, debate and make some decisions. That is what we are trying to do here. We are trying to begin a new way of doing the work of the Church in the United States. We may fail; but let us try and let people in the nation say of us that we cared enough to try."

Sounds like a really good idea to me; so let's keep trying. Thank you. (Applause)

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1/ For a transcript of the resolutions and recommendations, see www.elephantsinthelivingroom.com/Call_to_Action_Conference_1976.doc