

APP: A Movement for Change

Inspired by Vatican II, in the summer of 1966 a group of approximately 20 Catholic priests from the Diocese of Pittsburgh met clandestinely to consider forming a clergy association separate from the "official" Diocesan Clergy Council. Their desire was to have an independent voice in the diocese, free when appropriate to offer constructive criticism to the local bishop, working in collaboration with him when possible. At first, they were so concerned about a backlash from then Bishop John Wright, that they used numbers rather than names when printing out the minutes of the first few meetings. But that changed quickly. Later in the year they sent a public invitation to their next meeting to all priests in the diocese and to the bishop.

The group began studying the documents of Vatican II, applying them to each of their ministries. Inspired especially by *Lumen Gentium's* central notion of the Church as the People of God, and by *Gaudium et Spes'* charge to act in the world, they soon expanded their purpose in three directions: church renewal, social justice advocacy, and brotherly support.

For more than 50-year history, APP has remained faithful to this mission. While serving in many ministries, most often as parish priests, they have been a prophetic voice in the diocese, calling for full implementation of Vatican II and at the same time maintaining open channels to the now 5 bishops with whom they have served.

In 1993 after taking a survey of all its members, APP altered its mission statement and constitution, welcoming into full membership: former priests and their spouses, religious sisters, women and men lay Catholics and other Christians. This decision reclaimed Vatican II's understanding of the common priesthood or priesthood of all believers. Over the years, as one bishop after another asked APP to change its name to avoid confusion in the diocese, they have respectfully declined. "Association of Pittsburgh Priests" has a long, vibrant history and accurately identifies members, baptized and ordained, sharing in the priesthood of Christ.

In the area of social justice, they helped to start in 1972 the Thomas Merton Center for peace and justice by pledging financial support. The Merton Center's co-founder, Molly Rush, a member of the 1980 Plowshares action at King of Prussia, PA., has always acknowledged APP's crucial role in working with and supporting TMC for many decades. Significant APP concerns included war-tax resistance, anti-war advocacy and civil disobedience, anti-death penalty work, living wage advocacy, support of low-income housing, immigration work and support for church sanctuary, participation in support of labor rights, and so many others.

As a prophetic voice for church reform and renewal, APP has unswervingly lobbied for local input into the selection of bishops, optional celibacy and married priesthood, and women's ordination. The Association has also been a constant critic of the one issue stance of so many bishops against abortion, with their seemingly polarizing support for Republican candidates for office. Positively, APP has strongly championed the perspective of Cardinal Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" that connects all life issues into one "seamless garment:" abortion, death penalty, war, economic inequality, etc.

Intellectually, over the years, members of APP produced serious reflective pieces, including one on priestly lifestyle and simplicity, and another on priests and politics. Especially important, in 2006 Eugene Lauer, their key theologian, published a brilliant analysis on "the charism of priesthood," arguing for the elevation of professionally-trained lay ministers to preside at the Eucharist, thus solving the so-called "priest shortage."

In 2017, the APP reorganized itself as a Non-Profit and elected a layman, a women religious and an ordained priest for its leadership. Its Speaker Series brings cutting edge theologians to Pittsburgh audiences to make sense of real-time life issues. Since COVID-19 it has taken the Series on Zoom and gained national and even international acclaim, bringing religious thought into practical action.

Today, Pope Francis' determination to reclaim and fulfill Vatican II, building on the groundwork of John XXIII and Paul VI, coincides with APP's commitment. APP offers a glimpse at how all its members, baptized and ordained, share in the priesthood of Jesus and act as church to one another what a future church might look like and how the priesthood could remain relevant as part of that future.