News



by James Dearie

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April 17, 2018

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Frank Bonnike, former president of the National Federation of Priest Councils and later founding member of CORPUS, a national association of resigned Roman Catholic priests, died April 5. He was 95 years old.

According to those who knew him, Bonnike was a charismatic speaker and a strong leader. "He was a very energetic guy, full of ideas and possibilities with a kind of magnetic personality," Jesuit Fr. Thomas Sweetser, who met Bonnike in the early 1970s, told NCR.

Ordained a priest for the Diocese of Rockford, Illinois, in 1952, Bonnike was the first president of the Rockford Illinois Diocesan Presbytery and its senate and was a founding executive board member of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. He was elected as the federation's second president in 1970.

With the enthusiastic encouragement of Bonnike, Sweetser founded the Parish Evaluation Project, a team of pastoral consultants who assess and advise various churches and ministries throughout the country, in the early 1970s. Bonnike had agreed to mention the new project at the federation's next board meeting.

However, after the board meeting, Bonnike surprised Sweetser and many others by announcing that he was stepping down from his leadership position at the

federation. His resignation followed multiple conflicts with bishops and ongoing criticism from the conservative Catholic press, according to NCR's reporting at the time.

In September 1973, months later, Bonnike revealed in a letter received by NCR that he had fallen in love with Janet Proteau, a former Dominican nun, and that he intended to give up his role as an active priest in order to marry her.

After his marriage, Bonnike served as a lay Catholic chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois. In 1974, he helped found CORPUS, the Corps of Reserved Priests United for Service, with other married resigned priests, and served as the public face of the organization.

"We remain … men of faith," the CORPUS founders stated, "men who love Jesus Christ, with an essential loyalty to the Church and an undiminished commitment to the service of the people of God." The organization grew throughout the 1970s and '80s and held its first national gathering in 1988.

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In many ways, Bonnike proved a prophet of upcoming troubles in the church, particularly the priest shortage. Theologian Anthony Padovano told NCR he remembers Bonnike saying decades ago that "'the United States is going to lose 10,000 priests." Padavano says he replied, "Oh no, that's not going to happen. We may lose a number, but not 10,000.' Actually, it was 25-30,000."

Through CORPUS and in his own work, Bonnike criticized the celibacy requirement for the priesthood, especially as Catholic clergy became a rarer sight in the U.S. In a May 1978 piece published in NCR, he noted the decline of ordained Catholic ministers available in the military, at schools and in hospitals.

"How much are we willing to default for the price of celibacy?" he wrote, "How long can we justify such a practice when the Lord Jesus Christ himself made no such requirement of his coworkers in the priesthood?"

Born in 1923 in Elgin, Illinois, to Dutch immigrants, Bonnike graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in industrial management and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He entered the seminary at the Catholic University of

America at age 25.

Bonnike began his ecclesial career as a chaplain at the Illinois State Reformatory and went on to serve as the superintendent of a Catholic high school and a pastor. He was the Rockford, Illinois Diocesan Presbytery's first president and a founding executive board member of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, which he served as its second president.

Bonnike's service was not limited to the church and CORPUS. Former Illinois governor Richard Ogilvie tapped him to direct the Pace Institute, an organization that educates prisoners in the Cook County Jail. During his tenure there, Bonnike oversaw the institute's merger with the Safer Foundation, which was also founded by former priests.

Bonnike also helped Sweetser get the Parish Evaluation Project off the ground, giving him a speaking slot at a convention where he could talk about the project; Sweetser ultimately found his first project there.

Although resigned, Bonnike always considered himself to still be a priest, ready to serve in whatever way the church called him. He and the other founders of CORPUS "would never say 'ex-priest,' " Padovano says. When the term would appear in the press, they would contact media outlets to let them know that resigning his institutional role did not cause a man to lose his vocation.

"He was a 'priest forever,' " Padovano
says.

He is survived by his wife Janet, their two children, and six grandchildren.

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