

Buoyed by a new pope, priests gather to urge church reform

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) The death of liberal Catholicism has been proclaimed so often in recent decades that few even bother to check to see if the body still has a pulse.

But a fledgling organization of priests believes the obituaries are premature, and as the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests gathers this month to discuss an agenda for church reform, its leaders are pointing to support from the laity as well as inspiration from the top: Pope Francis.

“For me, his papacy so far has been a lifesaver,” said the Rev. Dave Cooper, a priest from Milwaukee who is head of the AUSCP, which will hold its second annual assembly at Seattle University from June 24-27.

Not that Francis is a starry-eyed liberal who is about to ordain women priests or turn the church into a representative democracy. He’s not. Rather, it is the new pope’s repeated exhortations for the church to engage the world, to be humble and open to dialogue, and above all to show people – including Catholics – a welcoming face that has buoyed Cooper and others in the AUSCP.

“The pastoral style is most encouraging to me personally,” Cooper said. “I hope it will grow and deepen and continue.”

The AUSCP was started in August 2011 by about two dozen priests from 11 states who met at a seminary near Chicago with the goal of trying “to keep the best of Vatican II alive,” referring to the landmark church council of the 1960s that opened Catholicism to the modern world.

Like similar groups of reform-minded clergy in Ireland, Austria and elsewhere, these priests were, as one put it, “more than mildly distressed by the ecclesial turn of events” in the past 30 years that has seen the Vatican and local bishops take strong measures to enforce orthodoxy and curb anything that smacks of dissent.

From that modest start two years ago, the AUSCP has grown to nearly 1,000 members from about 120 of the 195 dioceses in the country.

This month’s meeting is expected to draw about 250 of those priests, who will listen to church experts and debate 15 proposals that focus on promoting collaboration and transparency in the church. Proposals include a call for lay people and priests to have a say in selecting bishops, who are now chosen solely by the pope through a secret process.

But one proposal bumps up against the third rail of orthodoxy by calling for a study of ordaining women and married men to the priesthood. Just raising the ordination topic publicly raises the hackles of conservatives — especially younger clergy who entered the priesthood under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI and tend to be more orthodox.

One of the critics is the Rev. Martin Fox, who wrote a long blog post ripping the AUSCP as the “swan song” of aging liberal Catholics who were enamored with a “spirit of Vatican II” that has been quashed by a younger, more tradition-minded generation of clergy and laity. “Utterly pointless,” Fox said of the AUSCP’s agenda.

What’s telling is that Fox is not just any priest, but heads the Office of Priestly Formation for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. After a few of his fellow clerics objected to the broadside, Fox later apologized for some of his remarks and amended his original post.

But the thrust of his objections – which have been standard fare among church leaders for years – remained, and underscored a division that may not be overcome anytime soon. “If we keep inviting them, that’s all we can do,” Cooper said of his conservative brethren.

Another AUSCP leader, the Rev. Bob Bonnot of Youngstown, Ohio, rejected the idea that the association is a rallying point for disaffected older priests. “There is no question of dissent,” Bonnot said. “These are open questions in the life of the church and various priests want us, as priests, to discuss them.”

What's more, he said, almost all of the proposals – the calls for collegiality, ordaining women as deacons, and allowing use of the previous translations of the Mass – are ones that have been debated and sometimes supported by top church leaders.

“Are all the cardinals dissenters because they discuss these items?” he added.

Bonnot noted that the “vast majority” of his members are workaday parish priests rather than clerics who work in academia or church bureaucracies, and their proposals reflect the concerns of parishioners that they serve.

“Regardless of the ages of the priests that might be involved, the issues are enduring issues that are very much in play,” he said.

And discussing those issues openly is vital to the future of the church, said Cooper.

“The Catholic Church is a living organism and all living organisms change and adapt. As the Catholic Church continues to grow and expand, the genius of Vatican II would say that it must take root and grow among the people,” he said.

“We have to be where the people are. That is our passion.”