

## 18 Years Later....

Carl Hemmer's thought-provoking article Where is *CORPUS* Going? (page 43) appeared in *CORPUS REPORTS* in 2005. Carl reflected on the mission and strategies of *CORPUS* at that time. Optional celibacy and the return of married priests to canonical ministry had not been realized and would not be achieved during the time of Pope John Paul II. Nonetheless, *CORPUS* continued to support married priests, their families, and others who hoped for a renewed and inclusive priesthood through annual conferences, *Corpus Reports*, pension advocacy, and work with other national and international reform groups.

While noting the successes of *CORPUS*, Carl pointed out an undeniable reality: aging membership. He opined that within 10 years, i.e., by 2015, "most" of the original members would be deceased. For *CORPUS* to survive as an organization, he predicted, it would need a new generation of leadership. It would also need 1) funds to cover operating costs; 2) new, younger members; and 3) a new pope to change the direction set by John Paul II, especially as regards a renewed and inclusive priesthood.

Here is our reality: 18 years have passed since Carl's article was published.

- 1) All of the administrative work of *CORPUS* continues to be done by volunteers. The money taken in over the years through dues and donations covered operational expenses and what was left over was invested. There are still sufficient funds.
- 2) Membership continues to age. Operational functions are in the hands of "old-timers."
- 3) Pope Francis has been trying to restore the spirit of Vatican II. In March 2023, he said "There is no contradiction for a priest to marry. Celibacy in the Western Church is a temporary prescription." However, in January 2019 he said, "Personally, I think celibacy is a gift to the Church. I would say that I do not agree with allowing optional celibacy, no." What, if anything, he does regarding a renewed and inclusive priesthood remains to be seen.

Towards the end of his article, Carl wrote: "...the grim realities that *CORPUS* faces in the near future cannot be ignored...There is one...last resort—preparing a dignified and sensible plan for its close-down."

*CORPUS* has carried on well past the 10-year time frame Carl foresaw. However, we continue to age. Some are dealing with poor health and/or other limiting factors. Personal energy is declining. And there is no new generation of leadership to whom the torch can be passed.

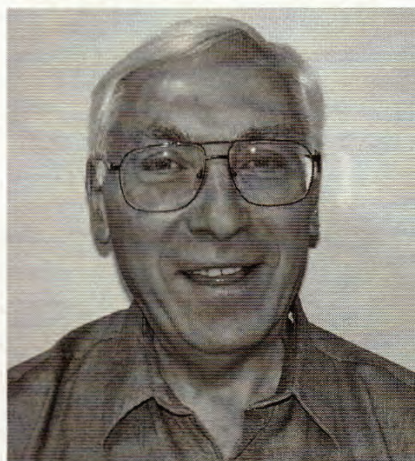
To quote Carl for the last time, "...the long years all of us have spent working for...change have not been wasted...We were always servants of a destiny that belongs to God alone."

Nick De Los Ryzes    Linda Pinto    Andrzej and Spencer Johnson    Linda and Phil Marcini



# Where is *CORPUS* Going?

By Carl J. Hemmer



*Carl Hemmer entered the Jesuit Order in 1951, was ordained in 1962, and left to marry his wife, Pat, in late 1967. He continued providing priestly services to communities and individuals in the Washington, DC area after moving there for what became a 30 year career in foreign aid with the U.S. Government. During this period, he raised two children and served as a City Councilman for 6 years. He was a founder of the National Association for Pastoral Renewal back in 1966, and also took part in the founding of what has become FCM and *CORPUS*. He and his wife co-managed the 1994 *CORPUS* Conference in Washington. Now retired, he continues wedding services, has served as a Hospice chaplain, and continues to consult on foreign aid issues.*

**W**hen young people reach the age of thirty, they often feel that they're crossing a divide, on the other side of which lies an intimidating unknown: mid-life. Their past choices, they discover, set limits on the hopes and aspirations that are feasible for the next period of their life. Today, our task is to help *CORPUS*, aged 30, to assess its possibilities for its post-30 future. In doing so, we need to remember first what *CORPUS* set out to become decades ago, what events occurred that constrained the possibilities for *CORPUS* success, and what its alternatives are for future activities consistent with its continuing purposes. My hope is that, by setting out my thoughts on these issues, I will be laying the foundation for a fully informed consideration of where *CORPUS* can and should go in the future.

Take a short trip with me now back to the early 70s when *CORPUS* was launched. In the American Church, the spirit and hopes opened by Vatican II were dominant. Despite the call of Paul VI for an end to appeals for optional celibacy, priests were leaving and marrying in large numbers. Some bishops were still sympathetic and cautiously supportive of optional celibacy. Active priests and priests councils offered continuous support. Surveys of lay opinion showed that two out of three

Catholics supported this change in Church law and practice.

The founders of *CORPUS* had no desire to lead a renegade reform movement. Instead they conceived of a reserve corps where married priests who were proven pastors or sacramental ministers and were ready to serve the Church again would wait for bishops to issue a call for their return. *CORPUS* counseled patience; we had to wait for the Church to act. In the meantime, *CORPUS* elaborated the theology and history and Church law that argued for a return to optional celibacy, and it carried this message tirelessly to those American bishops who were willing to listen.

Reputable theologians told us that a married clergy would soon be in place. Those who left felt that their departure from ministry was only for a time. During this period of waiting, the

reserve corps of married priests led by *CORPUS* by and large did not engage in the

"free" or unapproved ministry supported by the Federation of Christian Ministries (FCM) and later Celibacy Is The Issue (CITI). *CORPUS* believed that the growing numbers of married priests and the shrinking numbers of priests who remained would eventually persuade the Church to accept optional celibacy. With this in mind, *CORPUS* initiated annual national conferences to spread its message. It also reached out to other parts of the world to build

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an international alliance of married priests that would demonstrate the worldwide support in the Church for optional celibacy.

Move forward next to the present moment and ask: how does *CORPUS* now understand its mission and strategies, and what is it doing to relate to the Church that has emerged since the 70s? The move to optional celibacy was never realized but *CORPUS* has continued and strengthened most of the initiatives that it launched in the 1970's and 1980's. *CORPUS REPORTS* keeps members informed and stimulated. Annual national conferences are organized. Support for international associations of married priests and a drive to secure the pension rights earned by married priests have become *CORPUS* hallmarks. Its initial focus on optional celibacy has broadened into support for a reformed and inclusive priesthood that will welcome all who are qualified for priestly ministry, without reference to their marital status or gender or sexual orientation. *CORPUS* works with other Church reform bodies and, by offering web links to FCM and CITI, it encourages its members to take up needed ministries, without securing Church approval. The reserve corps is no longer expected to wait for an Episcopal call before its members return to needed ministries.

At the same time, the American Church that *CORPUS* seeks to reform has changed a great deal. In describing these changes, I lean heavily on Peter Steinfels 2003 study called "A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America." Other observers confirm most of Steinfels' observations. Briefly, John Paul II is the dominant guiding light for Church leaders and members, not Vatican II. The bishops who befriended *CORPUS* in the 1970's are now aging or retired; many have died. They have been replaced with bishops who are far less open to dialogue with married priests. Instead, they stress their role as guardians of orthodoxy and Church order. Facing a disastrous fall in the numbers of priests available and a reduced capacity of the Church to provide the sacraments, their solution is to call for prayer and a return to pre-Vatican II thinking about priesthood. They take their cues from the Vatican which still views married priests as pariahs and renegades who should be

disbarred from any further role in the Church's ministry. Exceptions to celibacy have been made to permit convert priests to serve and to build a corps of married deacons but Church leaders have not conceded that these official initiatives have undermined the earlier theological arguments for priestly celibacy.

Another change in the Church that affects *CORPUS* is the new profile of American priests, a group that once welcomed *CORPUS* initiatives. The increasingly dominant younger generation is more conservative than the priests of the 1970's and favors a return to traditional clerical behavior. These priests of the future look to John Paul II for guidance in stemming what they see as out-of-control changes driven by misunderstandings of Vatican II. The younger priests are also reported to include growing numbers who are homosexually oriented. What this means for support for an inclusive priesthood is not clear. They are included, but are they supportive of the inclusion of women and married priests as well? Since they lean toward conservative approaches to Church law and theology, they may not be instant allies in building inclusive priesthood.

Finally, the body of lay Catholics has also changed since the 1970's. The lay groups who once supported the *CORPUS* drive for a married priesthood have aging memberships. They have had to face the resurgence of conservative forces under John Paul II and have been forced into a defensive stance as Vatican II reforms have come under attack. A variety of pressing current issues — the peace movement, pro-life battles, child abuse scandals, etc. — have reduced the attention given to broader Church reform issues. Call to Action and Future Church support a married priesthood, but their influence with Church leaders is very limited. Also, those who want to retain a respected voice in Church circles have learned to keep their distance from reform groups and actions that upset the bishops. At the *CORPUS* conference in New York in the early 90s, Margaret Steinfels gave us an early warning of the uneasiness of liberal Church members with unauthorized ministry when she criticized the conference plan to have married priests celebrate a liturgy at the

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conference. Finally, lay members of the Church are slowly taking on pastoral tasks that priests used to handle. Many of these newly appointed lay members, together with the growing corps of married deacons, like their new roles and are not eager to turn over their hard-earned new place in the Church to returning married priests.

Getting back now to our question of the directions that *CORPUS* can or should set for its future, the changes that have occurred over these 30 years make it clear that *CORPUS* leadership today faces difficult choices in charting the organization's next steps.

*CORPUS* needs to decide what roles it wants to play as a reform body, what resources it needs to accomplish the desired tasks, and what strategies will work best. For purposes of discussion, let me lay out four broad choices that *CORPUS* can consider, together with the pros and cons that attach to each course of action.

The most obvious choice for the immediate future is to continue what *CORPUS* is now doing. Committed to gain the acceptance of the Church of an inclusive priesthood, *CORPUS* will focus its traditional activities on this goal. It will also continue annual conferences and offer *CORPUS REPORTS* as a platform for the discussion of a wide range of topics related to an inclusive priesthood. It will pursue its efforts to secure the pension rights of married priests. It will maintain its efforts to collaborate with other Church reform groups and to support the growth of an international federation of national bodies of married priests. And it will continue to facilitate its members' access to FCM and CITI if they want to make their pastoral expertise available now to those who accept the services of married priests.

Let us weigh the pros and cons for continuing the current *CORPUS* program.

The main argument for continuing the present formula is simply that it has worked up to this point. *CORPUS* has retained sufficient members to pay its operating costs and to provide a pool of members from whom

new leadership can be drawn.

Concerns about continuing the present program are prompted by the question: will

this same formula work for another ten years? Here the answer is not so clear. The original members of *CORPUS* were united by common experiences before they joined and by a shared desire to recover the roles in ministry that they had lost. They had old stories and old songs to share. In another ten years, most of them will be gone. In the next ten years, *CORPUS* will have to win the membership of new people who will represent far more diverse experiences, and a desire for acceptance to a kind of ministry they have never experienced. The crucial question for *CORPUS* is whether they will bring the practical skills to run conferences, engage bishops in dialogue, and design and implement strategies to get inclusive priesthood started.

To survive with its current set of activities, *CORPUS* will have to find a sufficient body of members to pay the cost of operations and with the right mix of skills and commitment to provide a new generation of leadership. With some of its current activities — such as the ambassador role to groups in other countries, the work of winning pension rights, having established relationships of trust with some of the bishops, and management of the annual *CORPUS* conferences — *CORPUS* will have to groom a new generation of leaders with uncommon skills. Are there segments of the Church where *CORPUS* will readily find the needed new members who want to work for an inclusive priesthood, or is the pool of people *CORPUS* needs rapidly drying up? After 30 years, *CORPUS* has been unable to gain Church approval for a far less radical change in its laws — optional celibacy. It is difficult to imagine any bishops any time soon who would be willing to discuss this kind of sweeping change in Church law and practice. If it takes another 30 years for *CORPUS* to get the Church to accept an inclusive priesthood, can it persuade its new members to commit themselves for 10 or 20 or more years to secure this goal? Sticking with the current set of *CORPUS* activities is the least risky option, but the challenges that lie ahead are daunting threats to the survival of *CORPUS* as it is.

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If sticking with its current program is a risky strategy for the future, perhaps other alternatives should be considered. Perhaps **CORPUS** should not only look favorably on members who have taken up ministry again, but take actions to help them in the ministries they choose. Two approaches to a more proactive position are sketched out below.

One alternative to simply continuing past patterns would have **CORPUS**, like FCM and CITI, develop its own support services for member participation in free ministry — i.e., ministry that does not have any Church authorization. Like FCM and CITI, **CORPUS** could provide a certification mechanism for its members and registration for baptisms. It could launch a web site that would help couples planning marriage or people seeking other kinds of ministry to find qualified ministers. Perhaps **CORPUS** could persuade FCM and CITI to join forces with it and provide a unified system for promoting free ministry.

The pros and cons of this alternative include the following considerations.

In its favor, **CORPUS** members would have help to get into ministry now. The inclusive ministry that **CORPUS** wants could be created and strengthened over the coming decades.

However, this alternative carries serious drawbacks. While this kind of initiative could make **CORPUS** more appealing to members uninterested in decade-long waits for Church acceptance of these kinds of ministry, it would put **CORPUS** into competition with FCM and CITI for what appears to be a very limited pool of ministers who are ready to serve. Moreover, a formal endorsement by **CORPUS** of free ministry would be read by bishops as a definitive **CORPUS** rejection of their authority and would end any readiness, however infrequent and unsatisfactory, to meet with **CORPUS** and discuss problems of the priesthood today. It could also drive a wedge between **CORPUS** and more conservative groups of married priests in other countries.

A different alternative to open ministry work for its members would have **CORPUS** help its qualified members to apply for the growing body of vacant ministry posts in the Church. Vacant and underserved ministries are found in a wide array of chaplaincies — in hospitals

and hospice units, in prisons, at universities, and in the armed services. In addition, many parish administrator jobs and similar parish

support posts are short of applicants. **CORPUS** could identify qualified members and vacant/underserved posts, and try to interest bishops in considering time-limited appointments to these ministries. In fact, some married priests have carried out these ministries despite the worldwide Church rules against the use of married priests.

The proposal has advantages and disadvantages.

In its favor, the proposal would give **CORPUS** members the prospect of carrying out Church-approved ministries. By directing needed skills to vacant and underserved ministries, **CORPUS** would also demonstrate to the bishops its primary commitment to help the Church carry out its ministries.

At least two formidable difficulties block pursuit of this alternative. First, any lead role by **CORPUS** would probably doom the initiative because of its association with optional celibacy. It would take a very ignorant bishop not to recognize that acceptance of any deals with **CORPUS** would be inviting the unwelcome elephant into his residence. The only way this arrangement works, it appears, is when a qualified individual wins the acceptance of a bishop because of good personal relations and with a tacit agreement that one's identity as a married priest will be kept very low key. Secondly, bishops seem to believe that they can recruit sufficient priests to fill ministry gaps by adopting a "don't ask-don't tell" policy toward gay priests, or by drawing on what they see as an ample supply of foreign-born priests, drawn from poorer countries. Wherever this "solution" is feasible, the bishops will prefer it to being drawn into a battle with Rome over the law of celibacy.

There is one final, last resort alternative that deserves **CORPUS** consideration — preparing a dignified and sensible plan for its ultimate closedown. Hardly anyone who has counted on **CORPUS** over the years to keep the celibacy issue alive in the Church wants to encourage its interment or serve as a

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pallbearer for the event. However, the grim realities that *CORPUS* faces in the near future cannot be ignored. Many hope for a major change in the Church's position on optional celibacy when a new Pope replaces John Paul II. When a new Pope appears, the time will certainly have come to decide whether the future is genuinely hopeful or whether, despite all of its worthy efforts, the time has come for *CORPUS* to close its doors. With this in mind, the pros and cons of this alternative deserve consideration.

On the positive side, the proposal would let *CORPUS* control its own future, including the timing and manner of its eventual phase out. It deserves better than to be executed unexpectedly by an accountant's pen when its resources run out. A responsible phase out plan would allow *CORPUS* to complete the important tasks it can still accomplish—for example, securing the pension rights of retired married priests and ensuring that the legacy of *CORPUS* has been adequately archived for future generations to appreciate.

However, the proposal carries serious problems. If the word gets out that *CORPUS* is planning to close down, current members will drift away and new members will be reluctant to join; loss of membership would speed up any closedown. Bishops will sense that they've won this battle and silenced an important advocate of celibacy changes. Married priest groups in other countries will be disheartened if *CORPUS* gives up, and may close down too.

What would I recommend as a course of action for *CORPUS* after considering the issues above? My preference is for three basic actions.

- While continuing the current activities of *CORPUS*, conduct regular surveys of younger/newer members to learn what most attracts them to membership. For example, do they attend conferences, what do they like most about *CORPUS REPORTS*, are they interested in and qualified for inclusive ministry, etc.?
- Work with some lay-led *COR* organization to survey the vacant or underserved ministries and determine what and where they are. Make this information available to members who are interested in and qualified for applying for these posts.

- Draw up a short list of early warning signals of *CORPUS* decline. For example, are member fees covering operating costs, is the ratio of new/younger members to older members falling and/or are membership renewals declining despite efforts to gain/retain members, and does a new/younger Pope quickly reiterate John Paul II's opposition to any form of inclusive priesthood?

These actions would commit *CORPUS* to a continued pursuit of things that work, demonstrate that a readiness to help the Church is in harmony with *CORPUS* goals, and ensure that *CORPUS* isn't taken by surprise by changes that signal a need to begin closeout actions.

To conclude, when I suggested this review to Allen Moore, my purpose was to help the *CORPUS* board make decisions about how it should shape the future of *CORPUS*. The grim facts I discovered were not what I wanted to find. A Church that is unfriendly to *CORPUS* in many ways is the place where *CORPUS* must live out its future. When I was 34, it was good to hear John O'Brien of Notre Dame say that, "optional celibacy is an idea whose time has come." I later welcomed the emergence of *CORPUS* and its tireless efforts to make this dream a reality. But now, some 38 years later and having turned 72, experience insists that I accept the unwelcome truth that optional celibacy is an idea whose time still lies beyond the current horizon.

Whatever the future holds and whatever choices *CORPUS* makes to survive and to pass its legacy onto others, the long years all of us have spent working for this change have not been wasted. We have learned valuable, unexpected lessons about ourselves and the Church. We have helped each other and all those who have listened to the *CORPUS* message to live up to the ideals of Vatican II and to mature as the Church's sons and daughters and priests. We were always servants of a destiny that belongs to God alone. We have painfully discovered the Church's preference for dismantling age-old rules by slowly burying them in a web of exceptions. In God's good time, optional celibacy will come and the Church will enjoy its benefits. And future believers who then learn the legacy of *CORPUS* will finally appreciate the

determination and patience of the feisty generation of loyal priests and prophets of our time.

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## CORPUS – Our Story

It was 1974 and Frank and Janet Bonnikz, Bill and Teddi Nemmers, and Frank and Mary McGrath met in Chicago and invited married priests in the area who would be interested in returning to service if their marriages were recognized and their wives and families were welcomed. They compiled a list of at least 30 married priests who would welcome a return to service and CORPUS was born. Fourteen years later, our first national conference was held in Washington DC with more than 330 in attendance. Over the years, our mission evolved from “Core of Reserve Priests United for Service” to “A faith community affirming and rooted in a revitalized church, including an inclusive priestly ministry.”

During the ensuing years, thousands of lives were given new hope through the efforts of CORPUS. Married priests reclaimed their ministry, wives embraced their recognition as women of worth and dignity and children reveled in being able to say, “My dad’s a married priest.” There was dialogue with bishops, although frequently limited and generally bringing little change. Interviews took place on TV and radio and countless articles appeared in newspapers and magazines. The fire of the Holy Spirit burned brightly in our hearts and Vatican II gave us a path to renewal that had not been seen for centuries. How soon would a married priesthood be restored in our church? We waited and waited and waited. It’s now 2023, 49 years later, and still we wait. A survey of our membership was conducted during 2017 and, at that time, the age of our membership was as follows: 23% were 60-74; 60% were 75-85; 15% were 85+. We are now six years older. Present initiatives include: Website; CORPUS REPORTS (last issue will be Fall 2023); E-CORPUS; John and Roberta Hydar Small Faith Community Award. Our present membership is about 300 and we have not added new members for several years.

Our Executive Council is in our second 3-year term, which extends to the end of 2024, and it has been an honor to serve you. We met in June to determine the future of CORPUS. As our discussion progressed, it was our consensus that CORPUS had made and continues to make a profound impact on the lives of thousands. However, we are aging, and we have done all we could as an organization to encourage an inclusive priesthood in the Catholic Church.

However, mindful of the importance of many long-lasting relationships among members, it was suggested that those who are interested could send their contact information (name, phone #, email) to Andrea and Spencer Johnson (amjohnson1969@gmail.com) and that information could be compiled into a directory and sent via email to those who signed up. In addition, our Constitution states that any assets remaining are to be conveyed to a non-profit organization (or community) “to be used for the purposes, as nearly as practicable, which are analogous to those for which the movement was created.”

Therefore, we ask you to send the name or names of such organizations to Phil and Linda Marcin (the4marcins@hotmail.com) so we might be able to put our remaining funds to the best possible use. Your input here would be a great help to us. It would be a fitting closure for an organization that has made an impact well beyond any initial expectations.

Thank you for your many years of support and your understanding in this matter. Please keep us in your prayers and be assured of our prayers for you.

In the name of our Creator, Savior and Spirit,

Nick De los Reyes   Linda Pinto   Andrea and Spencer Johnson   Linda and Phil Marcin