
IN THE BEGINNING...

In 1968, diocesan liturgical commission chairmen had been called to Chicago to learn about the new Order of Mass and how to implement it. They had been told that they would be among the first to see the first draft of the English translation and they imagined that they would be able to begin to prepare music and participation aids. But the translation had not yet been approved by Rome. “In those days, we were mostly volunteers and had come at our own expense,” recalled Father John O’Brien of Spokane.

They were disappointed, but the meeting soon became very productive. Msgr. Fred McManus recalled: “The BCL accepted a proposal from those present to form a group from the diocesan liturgical commissions, with representatives to be elected on a provincial or regional basis by the chairmen and secretaries of the Commissions. On April 22, 1969, the BCL Secretariat conducted an election by mail, soliciting nominations. “A tentative division of the United States into twelve regions (respecting existing regional efforts in the Southwest, Southeast, and New England) was included with this memorandum and a ballot for the first vote. Four representatives were selected from each region and a runoff election was conducted by mail on May 15. The BCL designated a convener for a meeting in the fall of 1969 (at the first meeting officers were elected.)

“One contribution of the BCL was the recommendation that, leaving the exact name and character of the projected body to the charter group, it should tentatively be considered a ‘federation of diocesan commissions.’ The BCL hoped that in addition to the exchange of information among the commissions themselves and the holding of regional meetings, the federation would be able to present informal proposals to the Bishops’ Committee and to be a source of information to the Committee” (Rev. Frederick McManus, writing in the *BCL Newsletter*, May 1969).

“This needs a certain stress,” McManus continued. “The purpose of the FDLC would develop and be refined, but the basic conception –not invented by the BCL but fostered by it – was clearly a distinct body, serving the commissions, but equally prepared to submit its corporate recommendations to the BCL, a happy meld of subsidiary and collegial relationships. And this dimension has been maintained... notably through the carefully-crafted ‘position statements’ and ‘resolutions of immediate concern,’ through the participation of its chair and executive director at the BCL meetings, and through co-sponsorship of the national meetings.”



Father O’Brien wrote, “At that [Chicago] meeting the seed was planted and our year of organization was the period of gestation, and our constitution brought forth the birth.”

Thus, on October 6, 1969, the first meeting of the new federation was held at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh. The Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy convened representatives of the country’s diocesan commission chairs – two from each region – and these charter Board members met in Parlor B and C. The BCL Secretariat was represented by Msgr. Frederick McManus and Father John Rotelle, OSA. The chair of the BCL was Bishop James Malone of Youngstown.

They discussed what the goals of this Federation would be. They stressed communication among commissions –“when one commission does something, the other should know about it.” They insisted that their focus should be pastoral... collaborating with the bishops and giving them information, but ever mindful of the “grass roots.” They established three committees – Goals and Purposes; Constitution; Regions and Planning. The first officers

were elected – Rev. James T. Shaughnessy (Peoria) was elected president; Rev. Joseph Cunningham (Brooklyn) was elected Vice President; and Rev. John Beno (Pueblo) was elected Secretary.

On October 7, the charter board members reconvened and gave brief reports of what their committees had discussed. They decided that they needed more time to adequately organize. Mr. Shaw (Santa Fe) suggested that they meet in January in El Paso in conjunction with the Southwest Liturgical Conference meeting (January 26, 1970).

The group resolved to bring several items to the November NCCB meeting, including a report of these proceedings and a report on various materials which had been developed by dioceses on the new Mass. They further resolved that some kind of presentation be made to all those assembled in Pittsburgh – over five hundred commission members had gathered at that hotel, October 6-9 in the inaugural year!

On October 8, three committees gave their reports. The “Goals and Purposes Committee” discussed the relationship of the Office of Worship to the liturgical commission and to this federation. There was mention of a separate music advisory group, but it was decided to include this aspect among the members of the Federation. They wrote that one purpose would be “to cooperate with the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy and the Secretariat in the sponsorship of National Meetings of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions.” The Constitution Committee already began to speak of the need for a national office and an executive secretary. The Region and Planning Committee proposed to keep the current regions, but to consider aligning along provincial lines in 1970. They declined to dictate regional agendas, since each region needed to be permitted to express differences of opinion. “This is important for the Liturgical Apostolate to be created within the United States Catholic Conference.” Another committee was formed – “The Bishops’ Proposal Committee” – and they would meet in January. [All quotations above are derived from the minutes of the meeting which were recorded and signed by John R. Beno.]

We are indebted to all of these pioneers for their foresight and dedication!

■ Rita Thiron, June 2019