

## **A voice for the laity**

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THE JOURNAL NEWS  
(Original Publication: May 9, 2005)

OSSINING — In the northern suburbs, the Voice of the Faithful is a passionate but small voice, a voice of experience but not youth, and a voice that speaks mostly from a single parish.

More than 100 of the faithful came last week to that parish, St. Ann's Catholic Church in Ossining, to celebrate the second anniversary of their chapter of Voice of the Faithful, a national Catholic group seeking a greater lay voice in the church.

They started with an anniversary Mass at which a woman wearing a pink shirt offered a "reflection on the homily" — not a homily itself, which is reserved for a priest or deacon. Cecilia Brennan, a Catholic school teacher, delivered a heartfelt but mainstream message, asking parishioners if they were rooted in Jesus instead of their jobs and worldly achievements.

"The things of this world will never satisfy like the Spirit," she said.

People asked for prayers for the new pope, for parents and children, and for "those excluded from this Catholic Church." After Mass, they headed downstairs for a lecture on the laity's role and a piece of frosted anniversary cake.

Three years after Voice of the Faithful rose up in Boston to respond to the then-shocking priest sex-abuse scandal, one of the few healthy, growing chapters in the 10-county Archdiocese of New York is the one at St. Ann's. Otherwise there are two chapters in Manhattan — Voice of the Faithful prefers to call them affiliates — and a new, fledgling one in Larchmont. Some Westchester residents belong to a group in Fairfield, Conn. And that's it.

"It's not that we don't have interest; we do," said Mary Ann Keyes, a national Voice trustee from Wellesley, Mass. "It's that it is hard to galvanize people and get them to form affiliates. People are aware of the problems the church has had, the scandal, but we have to get them out of their seats."

The Ossining chapter draws about 200 members from a dozen parishes and is considering becoming Voice's northern Westchester affiliate. The Larchmont group, despite being only 3 months old, may seek to develop as the southern Westchester counterpart.

At the St. Ann's meeting, members said they were taking the first steps on what promises to be a long road to a more prominent lay voice in the church. They said they were encouraged by small signs of progress.

"We can say to people now that we're Voice of the Faithful, and they know who we are," said Sue Gallagher, 69, a member of the parish council at St. Theresa Church in Briarcliff Manor and an organizer of the St. Ann's group. "They no longer say 'What?' But membership is a concern. Like with anything else in the church, or any organization, it takes people saying to someone 'Why don't you come to a meeting tonight?' "

From the start, Voice of the Faithful has promised to work for a stronger lay role in the church, and for greater accountability on the part of bishops, but not to challenge Catholic belief or the teaching authority of the church. The group, which claims 210 affiliates and 30,000 members, has been focusing on strengthening the role of the parish council. Representatives from 16 parish councils came to a recent Voice meeting at St. Ann's to trade ideas.

At last week's gathering, Fairfield University theologian Paul Lakeland said there was no forum in the church for lay Catholics, even though the Second Vatican Council encouraged them to speak out.

"If there is nowhere to do it, speaking out comes to be seen as dissent," he said.

Many bishops and others have been leery of Voice's true intentions, fearing a subvert, liberal agenda. Voice has been banned from church facilities in eight dioceses, including on Long Island and in Bridgeport, Conn.

The Rev. Edward Byrne, pastor of St. Ann's, who celebrated the group's anniversary Mass, said skeptics would be converted if they came to a few Voice meetings.

"You don't get better Catholics," he said. "They are so committed. They want what's best for the church. They're here and ready to work for the church."

St. Augustine's Church in Larchmont, meanwhile, has chosen to keep some distance from the local Voice chapter. The group can advertise its meetings in the church bulletin, but meets at a nearby Presbyterian church.

"I think these are good people with good intentions, but I don't think they should have a parochial role here," said Monsignor Walter Kenny, pastor of St. Augustine's. "I don't see anything positive coming from the group in Boston, where they don't give money to the diocese appeal and make negative comments about everything the bishop does. They may have some educational purposes, but I see the parish council as the voice of the faithful here."

Peggy Cashman, who helped start the Larchmont chapter, said her 25-person group is aiming to grow and find a niche in the region.

"We know the church disapproves, but we are very unhappy with many things in the church, and we're looking for changes," said Cashman, 75, a retired educator. "The church structure is not looking well, and I'm not sure the church will survive without changes."

One immediate challenge facing Voice of the Faithful is the age of its membership. Few people are under 60 and most remember well the Second Vatican Council, which set up their hopes for a greater lay role in the church.

That must change if the group is to survive long enough to grow. Cashman said her group is already considering recruiting on college campuses.

Eileen Sammon, 68, who started the St. Ann's group, said young families are often too busy for outside activities. But younger Catholics who do want to see change, she said, have to take some responsibility for seeing it through.

"Anyone who participates in our faith knows that if we put positive effort and energy into something, the Spirit works," said Sammon, a retired teacher. "The laity has been in this submissive role for so long, but it is a mandate to do something. I want to go to my maker knowing that I tried."