

10-20-07 - Allowing married priests may be group's next goal

By Richard C. Dujardin, Religion Writer, Providence Journal

PROVIDENCE — Voice of the Faithful — the Catholic lay group formed in the midst of the anger and frustrations of Boston-area Catholics over the priest sexual-abuse scandal — opened a two-day national convention at the Rhode Island Convention Center yesterday and signaled that it will be gearing up to speak out more forcefully on such topics as a married priesthood and the selection of bishops.

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a theologian at the University of Notre Dame and a longtime friend of the group, acknowledged in a keynote speech on the fifth floor of the convention center — not far from where Providence Bishop Thomas J. Tobin was having his bishop's ball — that in his 42 years of public speaking, his speech last night was one of the most difficult and challenging to prepare.

“Why so? Because I am aware that Voice of the Faithful has reached a crossroads, and that it is in the process of now trying to decide whether to continue on the road it has been on for these past five years or to move in a new direction.”

The priest said it was not his role to throw his lot with one side or the other, but rather to offer his perspective, remarking that while the group has accomplished much in demanding more accountability on the part of bishops in their handling of clergy sexual abuse, it's still not the time for the group to declare victory or to leave the field.

Reflecting the broadened agenda as covered in more than 30 workshops this morning and afternoon, Father McBrien, one of America's most widely quoted Catholic theologians, said he does not believe that Voice of the Faithful would be straying from its original mission by calling on the Vatican to reconsider the mandatory celibacy rule for Roman Catholic priests.

“Your current president, Mary Pat Fox, is right: celibacy does not cause a priest to become an abuser, but it is a factor — a factor, she said, in ‘creating this culture of secrecy that then causes the bishops’ to handle the crisis the way they did.’

There is another reason as well for reconsidering the rule, he said. In such a pool of men for whom lifelong celibacy is not a problem there is bound to be a disproportionate number of “sexually immature or sexually dysfunctional candidates,” he said. Opening the door of the priesthood to married men would broaden the pool of quality candidates, he said.

“Can you imagine what kind of candidates we would attract to the U.S. Senate, for example, or to any other high-ranking political, corporate or academic office if a commitment to lifelong celibacy were an essential, non-negotiable requirement.”

The priest said it is a matter of “some significance that the sexual-abuse scandal has never hit the Catholic priesthood in the non-Roman, Eastern-rite Catholic Churches, all of which have married priests.”

According to the group's own numbers, Voice of the Faithful has affiliates in 57 of the nation's 175 Catholic dioceses. But it was clear as members gathered to register yesterday that most of Voice of Faithful's rank and file are from the Baby Boom generation or before. Michael Hayes, managing editor of a Web site, BustedHalo.com, and author of *Googling God*, offered members in a workshop yesterday some of the challenges that Voice of the Faithful faces in trying to reach out to younger Catholics, particularly those in the so-called Millennium Generation, born after 1980.

In contrast to the Voice of the Faithful members, who are often perceived as more distrustful of authority, including church leaders, the Millennials, said Hayes, are far more trusting of civil and church authority. They

are more likely to get involved in helping one's neighbor not because it's a nice thing to do but because it is what Jesus asks of them, and far more comfortable than Baby Boomers to pray alone before the Blessed Sacrament and to seek out a priest for confession — all things the Voice of the Faithful members need to appreciate more if they're ever going to reach a new generation.

The meeting was not without outside controversy. Michael Sweatt, who co-founded the Voice of the Faithful's Maine affiliate, had announced several days ago that he has resigned from the group to protest its refusal to drop from today's speaking program a Jesuit priest who leads the board of trustees of a Catholic school in Portland that has thus far refused to offer compensatory damage to the sexual-abuse victims of Charles Malia, a former coach at Chevrus High School.

Sweatt, who counts himself as one of Malia's victims, said he had been trying for several weeks to get program leaders to drop the Rev. William Clark because he heads the school's trustees, but they seem to be "more concerned about maintaining the goodwill" of Father Clark "than standing up and demanding redress" for the harms and injuries inflicted upon a group of victims. "This," he said, "smacks of clericalism, something we abhor in the clergy, especially in the Catholic hierarchy."

In a statement issued yesterday afternoon, Voice of the Faithful leaders defended their position. It said that Father Clark joined Chevrus High School long after the abuses and after the settlements had been made to the abuse victims, and that the priest was to speak about parish life and not on the subject of dealing with victims of sexual abuse.

In one of today's featured workshops, on electing bishops, author Joseph F. O'Callaghan is expected to argue that it is imperative "in this day and age, when the implicit trust between bishops and people has been so eroded," that the faithful of the dioceses should be free to elect a person whom they know to be worthy of the office.