

6-21-08 - After rise, then turmoil, lay Catholic group finding footing

By JAY LINDSAY, AP, Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)

BOSTON— Long gone are the founder's dreams of millions of members, but gone too are the infighting and financial woes that shook the lay Catholic group Voice of the Faithful just a year ago.

The group founded in the worst days of the church's clergy sex abuse scandal to give laity a greater role has come through some bad times of its own, including financial problems and confusion over its future.

Its finances are sound and the spring visit by Pope Benedict allowed the group to reassert its relevance in a media campaign that it says drew hundreds of new members.

Leaders also say the group is committed to being less about outrage over the scandal and more about answers to the church's problems.

"What I have found is that anger will only go so far and being negative will only get you so far," said VOTF president Dan Bartley. "So you have to be about solutions."

Skeptics about the group's future remain.

"To be honest with you, I've never felt that they will endure. ... I don't think that their support is very wide," said Philip Lawler, author of "The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston's Catholic Culture."

Six years into its existence, the group counts 35,000 members, though membership is as easy as filling out a form on the group's Web site. The total is just a sliver of the estimated 64 million U.S. Catholics.

Even still, it can have significant influence, said William D'Antonio, who co-wrote a 2007 book called "Voices of the Faithful." With better networking with like-minded Catholic organizations, the group could find broad support, and its capable, motivated leadership can be effective, D'Antonio said.

"They are loyal to the church and they don't want to see a church as corrupt as they have discovered it is," he said.

The group was founded in the Boston area in 2002, after the release of court papers that showed church leaders shuttled pedophile priests from parish to parish, while keeping their crimes secret.

The group's long-standing goals remain helping victims of clergy sex abuse, supporting priests of integrity and increasing the role of laity by, for instance, having more say in financial management of dioceses.

Founder Jim Muller said in 2002 that his dream for the group by 2005 included enrollment of half the world's Catholics, a chapter in every parish and enough standing to counterbalance the church hierarchy, "a bit like Congress."

But Voice was not well-received by many church leaders, who labeled members as dissidents out to change church doctrine. And by last year, members fought among themselves as anger over the scandal cooled and the group was left with questions about its purpose. It also projected a \$100,000 deficit in its coming fiscal year.

Bartley said in the months preceding its elections in March, the group tackled core questions, including whether it should stop trying to work within the church, or if it should become solely about supporting victims of clergy sex abuse.

Leaders decided to stay committed to their original goals, believing it needed to work to change systemic problems, including a lack of openness, that led to the scandal. But Bartley said VOTF can't be all about

outrage. It has tried, for example, to publicly back church leaders who are improving financial accountability.

Bartley also said the group needs to be less defensive about criticism from church officials. The years have proven they are not out to change church doctrine, he said.

"I think it's a little clearer now that we're not out to attack and destroy," he said.

Voice of the Faithful raised its public profile, and gained 1,500 members, as a result of Pope Benedict XVI's visit in April, Bartley said.

The centerpiece of their efforts was a full page ad in The New York Times that ran just before the Pope arrived, and called on Catholics to help them change the church. The group paid for the ad with an e-mail appeal that raised \$71,000 in seven days, an amount equal to 11 percent of the group's \$650,000 annual budget and by far the most the group had ever raised in such a short period, Bartley said.

A new part-time fundraiser has also helped boost finances, and the budget will be balanced for fiscal 2009, Bartley said.

Lawler said the recent activity doesn't indicate a groundswell of support. Many Catholics agree the laity should be more involved in church decision-making, but Voice of the Faithful's liberal tilt, which he said is obvious based on church thinkers and positions it has supported, makes it tough for many to trust.

"I guess what it comes down to is I'm not ready to accept their leadership because I'm suspicious of their motivations," he said.

Matthew McCormick, a Chicago engineer who describes himself as "center-right," said the people he's met since joining his Voice chapter in December are thinking, faithful Catholics. The 42-year-old describes a "catharsis" in being able to discuss with them the church's wrenching moral failure - a discussion he says isn't happening in the pews or among church leaders.

Voice of the Faithful is needed, he said, to help the church conduct itself as any Christian organization should, so no more damage is done to the church he loves.

"My faith in the institutional church has been sorely tried," McCormick said. "I'm hanging on by my fingernails."