

Recently, Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) marked its fifth anniversary. News stories reported the organization's accomplishments, its current challenges, and reflections by friends and critics about its record and its future. The question is: Does Voice of the Faithful still matter? Since VOTF's goal is to increase the role of the laity in the life of the church, that question should have special interest for readers of Commonweal.

In our judgment, and we hope yours, shared responsibility for the life and work of the church is a fact, not an option. Unfortunately, few opportunities are provided for laypeople to exercise their responsibilities. Until there are church reforms that extend serious consultation and shared responsibility to the laity, VOTF provides one indispensable means by which ordinary American Catholics can meet their responsibilities for the life of the church.

VOTF, it is our conviction, provides this opportunity at a particularly critical moment in U.S. Catholic history. Since the sexual-abuse crisis exploded in 2002, the bishops have taken some significant steps to prevent future abuse, but they have failed to address what we think are the underlying causes of the worst scandal in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. Bishops are unlikely to open up the decision-making process unless there are strong, independent Catholic organizations working to make the church's pastoral planning, personnel policies, and financial operations more transparent, honest, and accountable.

We are well aware that skepticism concerning VOTF's mission and effectiveness can be found across the ideological spectrum. Laypeople do not have a lot of experience solving church problems, and the abuse crisis that brought VOTF to life also opened up long-hidden wounds and very serious conflicts among church members. Because many church leaders have turned away from Vatican II reforms aimed at developing responsible lay participation in church decision making, such as open and fully representative diocesan and parish pastoral councils, Catholics have few forums to discuss how they can best carry out their responsibilities as "the people of God."

As a consequence, VOTF could hardly avoid getting caught in the middle of often bitter debates between Vatican-oriented conservatives and liberals advocating changes that church officials rule out as contrary to church teaching. If VOTF leaders refuse to take a stand on issues such as homosexuality or women's ordination, they get blasted from one side; if those Catholics whom conservatives consider "dissenters" show up at a VOTF meeting, the entire organization is denounced by the self-appointed defenders of "orthodoxy." The result is that many laypeople, in no mood for fights at church, decide against becoming involved, while intelligent liberal and conservative Catholics who could help the church recover its integrity and vitality settle for criticism without responsibility. The often unfair criticism of VOTF only further demonstrates the great need for an independent Catholic organization pledged to working with survivors of abuse, supporting priests as they wrestle with the problems posed by the crisis, and building structures of governance that will implement our church's official commitment to shared responsibility among all the baptized-laity, clergy, religious, and the hierarchy.

VOTF brings together active Catholics who work for constructive reforms. Studies show that most VOTF members are parishioners active in many ministries who have a good relationship with their pastors. They have found many priests who affirm their effort to support survivors of abuse and seek a greater role for the laity in the life and work of the church. We think that three lessons learned from the actions of bishops during the past five years argue persuasively that VOTF is as necessary now as on July 20, 2002, when four thousand Catholics gathered in Boston with Pentecost-like fervor to offer an independent lay response to the sexual-abuse crisis.

Lesson one: addressing symptoms will not resolve the abuse crisis

To their credit, the U.S. bishops can point to a broad list of actions taken since June 2002 when they issued the groundbreaking Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. They committed themselves to a policy that dictated the permanent removal from ministry of any priest who committed even a single act of abuse against a minor, and they pledged to report these crimes to civil authorities. They set up a National Review Board composed of prominent lay Catholics to oversee the implementation of the Charter and to study the scope, causes, and context of the crisis. The bishops also established an Office of Child and Youth Protection to coordinate safe-environment programs for Catholic children and to facilitate annual audits and reports of diocesan compliance with the Charter. Most dioceses established local committees to assist the bishop in dealing with abuse. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has since issued annual reports showing widespread diocesan compliance with the Charter's provisions. Unfortunately, many bishops thought these initial steps were sufficient. As early as November 2003, Bishop Wilton Gregory, then

president of the USCCB, announced that bishops had turned the corner on the abuse crisis and it was time to get back to the traditional work of the church.

Given the fact that the USCCB lacks the authority to require compliance with the Charter, the procedures put in place in most dioceses have been impressive. Still, these policies address only the symptoms of abuse. They leave unchanged the culture of secrecy, lack of public accountability, and presumption of privilege that made the abuse possible. When confronted with reprehensible behavior by priests, too many bishops placed the reputation of the priesthood above all other values: that's what is meant by clericalism. Too often bishops ignored the wounds of survivors and their families and betrayed the trust of the faithful in order to avoid scandal, hiding egregious violations of canon and civil law. Bishops have acknowledged the sins of the priest offenders but they have too rarely addressed their own failures and the failures of the structures of governance. This has created mistrust of the hierarchy not only among the laity but also among priests.

In 2004, the National Review Board presented the bishops with two reports. One, the John Jay Study, which outlined the statistical scope of the scandal, was widely discussed in the press. The second report, which offered a preliminary assessment of "causes and context," pointed to the damage done by the lack of openness and accountability. The National Review Board offered many suggestions for reform, emphasizing the need for open consultation between bishops and priests, deacons, lay ministers, and lay members of the church. There is almost no evidence that bishops have embraced this call for collaborative consultation. Instead, the church has moved in a quite different direction. There has been an effort to further limit the role of the national bishops' conference, leaving individual bishops and their people even more on their own. Yet, as stories of sexual abuse receive less intense media coverage, stories of financial mismanagement, even larceny, at parishes and diocesan offices have made headlines. The underlying causes of these problems are embedded in the clerical culture and closed-door governance system of the church. Yes, the Catholic Church is a hierarchical system, but hierarchy need not be unresponsive or irresponsible. Here, too, the need for an independent Catholic voice like VOTF seems self-evident. VOTF will continue to urge reforms such as those advocated by the bishops' own National Review Board in 2004, and to provide independent assistance in the development of the more formal study of "causes and context" recently commissioned by the bishops.

Lesson two: governance without accountability invites abuse

Priests who sexually abused children and bishops who ignored or enabled the abuse have largely escaped criminal accountability. Attorneys general and district attorneys in several jurisdictions have compiled overwhelming evidence of abuse, but only a minority of cases have led to indictments. Statutes of limitation or other legal restrictions have allowed most accused priests and bishops to avoid criminal sanctions. One consequence is that abusive priests removed from active ministry often disappear into communities where no one is aware of their presence. This places children at risk. VOTF, working with survivors of abuse, has supported efforts to reform state laws that now limit the accountability of offenders. There are compelling reasons to oppose the retroactive lifting of statutes of limitation, as Mark A. Sargent has pointed out in *Commonweal* ("Vengeance Time," April 20). But many VOTF members believe that, given the enormity of the crimes involved, there are equally compelling reasons for doing so. Almost all the nation's bishops have opposed such reforms and sometimes bitterly attacked Catholic advocates and lawmakers who think legal reforms are needed. Here is an example of the need for reforms aimed at shared responsibility in church affairs. The bishops speak to legislators on behalf of the whole church on complex public-policy matters regarding sexual abuse, but rarely if ever is there an opportunity for lay Catholics to deliberate with their leaders about these controversial matters.

Even among themselves, bishops are pretty much on their own, taking no responsibility for the actions of their brother bishops. The USCCB has made it unmistakably clear that according to Catholic teaching individual bishops are accountable only to the pope. To date, the only significant action taken by the Vatican in response to the scandal—apart from stern words about the evils of sexual abuse of children—has been to confer a major ecclesiastical honor on Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law, the only U.S. prelate forced to resign because of public protests against his persistent disregard for survivors and their families and his serial reassignment of known priest-predators. Worse, there appear to have been no serious consequences when some bishops ignored or even violated provisions of the 2002 Charter. The archbishop of Chicago and the bishop of Santa Rosa, California, for example, suffered no consequences when they delayed the removal of priests who abused children (one priest fled the country and the other committed more abuse before he was finally removed). VOTF leaders in Chicago and nationwide have asked the bishops to reconsider the expected election of Chicago's Cardinal Francis George as president of the USCCB. In Los Angeles, preliminary reports of evidence in the newly released personnel files of clergy indicate a pattern of reassigning sexually abusive priests; once again no one has been held accountable, at least so far. As these incidents suggest, the scandal is far from over.

Given a structure in which each bishop is accountable only to the Holy See and free to choose not to share responsibility with his priests and people, unwise decisions are all but guaranteed. In this setting, the presence of a faithful, intelligent,

independent Catholic organization dedicated to truthfulness, support for survivors, and accountability is indispensable. VOTF has tried to provide that independent voice, to be an advocate for survivors of abuse, and to monitor the performance of national and local review boards. It has argued for the introduction or improvement of already mandated structures of shared responsibility, such as parish and diocesan pastoral councils and finance committees. That is what the organization means by its motto: "Keep the Faith, Change the Church."

Lesson three: it is unreasonable to expect meaningful reform from the hierarchy alone

The bishops are deeply attached to a closed system of governance, which they claim is required to ensure the unity and orthodoxy of the church. Even on financial matters, personnel, and pastoral planning, most bishops continue to insist on total control, an attitude that has no persuasive theological justification. Many bishops refuse the help of faithful, talented laypeople ready and willing to assist them. Even the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, an organization made up of highly successful Catholic business executives, whose only purpose is to strengthen the management of the church's financial and human resources, has found at best a lukewarm response for its recommendations regarding more open financial reports, uniform accounting methods, professional staffs, open discussion of fiscal policies, and improved use of mandated financial committees.

Yet five dioceses have already declared bankruptcy and the bishops have paid out over \$2 billion in settlements and legal fees. Parishes have been closed, too often with little or no input from those most affected by these decisions. Even where consultation takes place, often the only lay voices heard are those invited by the individual bishop. The archbishop of New York recently declared with pride that the 2.5 million members of the diocese needed no report of diocesan finances because his own handpicked Wall Street experts had reviewed them. Long experience with trade unions, corporations, and nonprofit organizations has taught most laypeople that such top-down systems of administration almost always develop serious problems. It is our conviction that making the changes to organizational arrangements that will prevent another sexual-abuse crisis requires sharing decision making more broadly with clergy and laypeople. Nor will our church find creative, responsible ways to lessen the impact of financial settlements and improve the embarrassingly meager financial support Catholics provide for the church's many ministries unless it finds ways to get the laity involved. VOTF is offering ideas about how to do that.

Recently VOTF decided to launch a campaign to persuade the Vatican to rethink the church's commitment to clerical celibacy. This effort was not a departure from VOTF's original charter. From the start, VOTF has pledged to support "priests of integrity." After a long study of the question, a VOTF task force came to the conclusion that asking for an open discussion of optional celibacy was the best way to do that—hardly a novel or extreme recommendation. Yet it is one sign of the deterioration of public dialogue within the church that the announcement of this campaign to reassess celibacy was greeted by many commentators as evidence that VOTF has now become a vehicle for "dissent." In fact, since 1970 many American priests have asked for reconsideration of celibacy as a requirement for ordination. Of course, there have always been married priests in the Eastern-rite churches. There are also many married Catholic priests in the United States who have been permitted to continue their priestly ministries after converting to Catholicism from other churches. Before leaving Brazil this year to take up his position as head of the Vatican Congregation on the Clergy, Cardinal Cláudio Hummes urged that the celibacy requirement for ordination be reexamined. Vocations of married men to the ordained ministry of the diaconate are booming. No one disputes the fact that the diminishing number of priests are vastly overworked and increasingly unable to meet the sacramental and pastoral needs of a growing Catholic population. Ordination of married men to the priesthood could help resolve a number of pressing questions around parish closings and consolidations. Advocates of change are quickly denounced, even by people alert to pastoral needs. But, for the sake of the church and its mission, VOTF is determined to open such questions to public discussion.

Conclusion

The crucial question for American Catholics is: Have the bishops corrected the problems that caused the crisis of sexual abuse? Have survivors received the justice they should expect from the church? Have we as a church done all we can to reach out to survivors and their families, to make sure that their voices are heard as our church makes its decisions, and to insure that pastoral as well as legal considerations guide our response to lawsuits against the church? How is responsibility shared among the hierarchy, clergy, deacons, ministerial professionals, and laypeople for addressing the roots of sexual abuse and the cover-ups? Are we Catholics organized in a way that will allow us to carry out our mission in the years to come?

In response to such questions, VOTF's members believe that the work needed to resolve the sexual-abuse crisis is far from over. The conditions that gave rise to the crisis—lack of shared responsibility, transparency, and accountability—have not changed significantly, and in many dioceses have gotten worse. Repentance, renewal, and reform are painful,

sometimes messy, endeavors, but lay Catholics cannot afford a return to business as usual. A reinvigorated American Catholicism will come about only if lay Catholics take personal responsibility for their church. The good news about Voice of the Faithful is that thousands of Catholics, active in their parishes and in church ministries, have held fast for five years in their pledge to “Keep the Faith, Change the Church.” The bad news is that these members fight on alone, and that too many others, well informed about church affairs and sharing VOTF’s values and goals, have wished VOTF well but have not joined or sent a check. Nor-and this is crucial-have they formed alternative organizations through which to carry out their responsibilities as Catholics.

On its fifth anniversary, VOTF invites lay Catholics in the pews, in professional church ministries, on parish and diocesan councils and committees, to ask if our responsibility for the church depends on a pastor’s invitation. Recent experience tells us pretty clearly where the U.S. church will go if all decisions are left in the hands of the bishops and the Vatican, with little or no consultation with parish priests and the laity. We know American Catholics can do better, and we owe it to those who went before us to try to strengthen the American church for its mission of service to the human family.

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