

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL FIVE PROPOSALS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN THE CHURCH

The scandal of priestly sexual abuse and the cover-up by the bishops points to the need for structural change in the Catholic Church. Voice of the Faithful, a mainstream organization of lay Catholics, founded in 2002 in Wellesley, Massachusetts, declared its mission to be “a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church.” VOTF also adopted three goals: 1: to support survivors of sexual abuse; 2: to support priests of integrity; and 3: to shape structural change in the Church.

Few Catholics would quarrel with VOTF’s first two goals, but many have asked “what do you mean, structural change?” In response, Voice of the Faithful offers specific proposals for structural change. Our purpose is to initiate a conversation among all concerned parties, the bishop, the clergy, and the people in the pews. As these proposals make clear we do not have a hidden agenda. None of our proposals are written in stone; they are simply ideas to be discussed and debated.

In order to enable the faithful to “actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church,” we believe that the Church must recover its ancient tradition of seeking the counsel and consent of the faithful. We propose that elected representatives of the people from the parishes, as well as representatives of the priests, and of the religious communities can give counsel and consent in the name of the entire body, so that “what touches all, should be approved by all.” Some of our proposals may necessitate changes in canon law, ever-evolving over the centuries. With these thoughts in mind we offer for discussion and debate five proposals:

1. The Election of Bishops by the Faithful of the Diocese. Bishops should be elected from diocesan clergy by elected representatives of the clergy, religious, and people gathered in a diocesan synod under the presidency of the archbishop as metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province and in the presence of the other bishops of the province. Confirmation of the election by the archbishop and provincial bishops testifies to the catholicity of the Church.

2. The Role of the Faithful in the Selection of their Pastors. The sexual abuse of children by predatory priests emphasizes the right to parishioners to be fully informed of the background of a prospective pastor or associate pastor. The candidate should be interviewed and approved by an elected parish personnel committee. Once the committee gives consent the bishop should make the appointment, thus testifying to the catholicity of the Church.

3. Diocesan Pastoral and Finance Councils. Both Councils should be composed of elected representatives with the laity in the majority and should have oversight of issues relating to worship, religious education, social concerns, diocesan and parochial administration, financial administration, and other diocesan pastoral works.

4. Pastoral and Finance Councils and Safety Committees in Every Parish. Similarly the bishop should mandate the establishment of Pastoral and Finance Councils and Safety Committees in every parish. Both Councils should be composed of elected representatives of the parishioners and should have responsibilities within the parish similar to those of the Diocesan Pastoral and Finance Councils. Recognizing that the protection of our children is of paramount importance, we propose that a Safety Committee be established in every parish. The members, elected annually by the parishioners, should (1) insure that prevention education is conducted annually for all children, parents, and others; and (2) that criminal background checks are conducted annually on all parish clergy, staff, and volunteers.

5. The Right of the Faithful to own Church Property. A parish corporation consisting of all registered parishioners, the bishop, and the pastor should be established. The officers and directors should be elected by the parishioners. The bishop and the pastor should serve *ex officio*. The corporation should have the authority to use, administer, and maintain parish property, to acquire new property, or to sell unneeded property.

These proposals are intended to spur discussion about crucial areas of church government. Since the Second Vatican Council we have been told many times that “this is our Church” and that we must take responsibility for it. If it is truly to be our Church, then all of us, bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laywomen and men must have a real sense of ownership. In the present circumstances only the bishop has that.

In order to convey a sense of ownership our proposals are founded on the ancient principle of counsel and consent. Their aim is to suggest the means for the laity to participate in the governance of the Church without demeaning the authority of the bishop or the pastor. We believe that our proposals are prudent and just and in conformity with the Christian tradition. We hope that the bishop, as well as pastors and associate pastors will encourage discussion in the parishes preparatory to the convocation of a diocesan synod where they can be debated and refined. A Church acting on the “counsel and consent of the people” will be a vibrant Church, energized to spread the Good News of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

