

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL AT FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

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When I said "Good morning everyone!" the powerful response from the audience jolted me and told me that we were ready to roll!

The conference sponsored by VOTF in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York at Fordham University on October 25 was a wonderful experience for all of us who helped to plan it and to participate in it. The planning extended over several months and involved many complications as we debated ideas, discarding some and accepting others.

The planning process and the unfolding of the day emphasized again that the unity of Christ's Body, the Church, depends upon the harmonious functioning and interaction of its many parts. Each of the members has his or her special gift to contribute. Unity and diversity are its essential characteristics. Thus no one can declare that someone else is unnecessary to the well-being of the whole.

We gathered in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, knowing that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he is there in our midst. From near and far we came together as faithful and courageous Catholics filled with love for our wounded Church.

Our gathering was an historic event as it marked another stage in the emergence of the laity as leaders in our Church. We came together in fulfillment of our baptismal responsibility to work with our bishops and priests for the good of the entire Body.

Our conference exemplified the mission and goals of Voice of the Faithful, providing "a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church."

We came together to express our support for our beloved brothers and sisters who have unfortunately been victimized by some of our priests and bishops. All of us bear responsibility for the terrible suffering inflicted upon them and we must do all in our power to help to heal them.

We came together to affirm our love and admiration for the thousands of good priests who minister to us every day, offering the eucharist on our behalf, baptizing our children, celebrating our marriages, lifting us up when we are on the point of despair, anointing us when we are ill, and being with us and our families as we are mourned and buried.

We came together to reflect on the ills that beset the Church, especially the massive failure of leadership. We must work to change the culture of secrecy, fear and intimidation which has brought us to this sorry pass, and which imposes unwarranted

limitations on lay men and lay women who wish to offer their gifts to the benefit of the entire Body of Christ.

We were challenged to look at the current crisis clearly and boldly and to hold bishops and priests accountable for their past and future leadership. We must also take the opportunity, in collaboration with them, to rethink those aspects of the Church's life that have contributed to the present situation. Like St. Paul, we can boast that we have kept the faith and we pray that we will continue to do so. We must also work to change the Church so that it is more truly reflective of the gracious kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fr. Joseph McShane, who had been inaugurated as President of Fordham University the day before and who had proposed that we schedule the conference on October 25 was more than warm in his welcome to Voice of the Faithful. He reminded his listeners of the development of the Sodality, a lay movement at Fordham, at the beginning of the previous century, and linked Voice of the Faithful with it and welcomed us home.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests stirred the audience with the description of the horrors they suffered as children and the betrayal by the bishops who allowed priestly predators to run free.

Recognizing that there are thousands of faithful and upright priests we presented an award In Honor of all Good Priests to Msgr. Philip Murnion, the director of the National Pastoral Life Center, who had recently died.

Our keynoter, Eugene Kennedy, pointed to the need for the Church to develop a positive doctrine of human sexuality that does not divide body and soul and thus distort God's creation. Human nature is the handiwork of a good God and so one may not denigrate the body by divorcing it from the soul. Kennedy emphasized the need for the bishops to become more attuned to the life of the people in the pews.

Some 471 participants signed an open letter to the bishops meeting in Washington in November asking them to put on the agenda the question: "How can an effective lay voice in the Church be incorporated into parish and diocesan pastoral councils and a national council?" The topic was not included on the bishops' agenda nor has there been any response from Bishop Wilton Gregory, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

During the afternoon there were some fifteen breakout sessions on a variety of themes. Preoccupied as I was with matters of organization I really didn't get to hear many of them but I was moved by the extraordinary spectacle of about 1500 people moving purposefully throughout the day from one session to another.

We came to listen, to dialogue, and to praise God together. I believe the conference achieved its primary goals: to educate, motivate and inspire everyone who

participated. A real spirit was evident and I believe that people went home determined to carry on the always ongoing work of reforming the Church.

In the sampling of evaluations that I saw people spoke of the need for workshops to deal with practical problems on the local level. This is something that we may attempt to do in the future. Meantime I think people, without waiting for their bishops, should take the initiative in the parishes and continue the process of educating themselves and developing positive programs and policies to increase lay involvement in the councils of the church on every level.

“Thank you God for most this amazing day!”