

10-26-07 - Five-year growing pains

As outrage fades, Voice of Faithful looks to sustain reform mission

By CHUCK COLBERT, National Catholic Reporter

Boston - Voice of the Faithful, the lay reform organization founded as a response to the clergy sex abuse crisis in the Catholic church, faces significant questions about its identity and mission as it observes its fifth anniversary.

A centrist organization that has attempted to avoid some of the long-standing contentious issues in the church, it nevertheless has stirred considerable controversy in some circles by raising questions about authority, accountability of bishops and the best way to handle the sex abuse crisis.

The organization was to hold its national convention Oct. 19 and 20 in Providence, R.I.

As the organization looks to the future, it faces questions about how much influence it can have in an institution where laity, especially women, have no place at the top decision-making levels. Beyond the initial flush of anger and outrage at the sex abuse crisis, some wonder how the organization will sustain interest in reform and advocating for victims, and what kind of reform it will want to pursue.

William D'Antonio, who will speak about research findings from his study of the organization, offered an assessment. "The national membership doesn't challenge the leadership to challenge the bishops," he said during a recent telephone interview, adding, "Some affiliates have done this, but there has been no cohesive demand."

While acknowledging that point, Mary Pat Fox, president the organization, said one of her goals is to "move the organization from an anger to love mode."

"Could we challenge the bishops more? Absolutely," she said over the telephone. "But we can't let that stand in the way of having impact."

Delaware's new law

She argues that the organization has had an effect outside the church structure, pointing to recent legislative reform passed in Delaware where the Child Victims Act, which became law in July, opened up a two-year window to file suits and abolished the statute of limitations in civil cases. "We played a role there," said Fox, and in other states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Ohio, all of which have passed legislation in recent years extending the statute of limitations regarding sexual abuse.

Some have called Delaware's legislation "the strongest bill for child abuse victims in the country," since it holds liable not only perpetrators, but also organizations that allowed abuse to occur through gross negligence.

David Clohessy, national director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, agreed that organizational muscle flexing has helped in various state legislatures. Yet where Voice of the Faithful adds the "punch," he said, "is reminding everyone that the hierarchy is not the church, and the laity are not sheep. In the face of unspeakable horror, the easiest thing to do would have been to deny it or give up. They chose neither course."

Nonetheless, some tensions have surfaced between survivors and the organization. A survivors' advocate and founder of the Maine chapter, for example, has pressed national leadership to disinvite a convention presenter for his refusal to step down from a trustee position at Jesuit-run Cheverus High School in Portland, Maine. Paul Kendrick, an alumnus, has asked Jesuit Fr. William A. Clark to resign or advocate for "justice and restitution" for 10 victims who allege they were abused by priests and a lay teacher at the school.

Fox declined to comment on the matter. Clark, who was not affiliated with Cheverus during the period the alleged abuse occurred, was scheduled to lead a Saturday afternoon workshop.

No survivor was a featured speaker at the convention, a departure from the group's first convention in Boston, although a special last-minute addition to the program focused entirely on survivors' perspectives, offering suggestions for advocacy and action.

While a major goal of Voice of the Faithful -- changing church structures to force greater accountability -- remains out of reach, the group claims success in the less measurable area of raising the consciousness of Catholics.

Svea Frazer and Peggie Thorpe, then parishioners at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Wellesley, Mass., where they and about 25 others helped to found Voice of the Faithful during the winter and spring of 2002, recalled their "absolute shock" at revelations of clergy sexual abuse of minors. They remember their "dogged determination to undo what was in place that allowed the abuse and cover-up by the bishops," Thorp said.

Looking back over five years, Frazer expressed disappointment the organization is not "further along" with its three stated goals: support for survivors, support for priests of integrity, and effecting structural change. She is also disappointed with the tensions within the organization over balancing the three goals.

Naive at first

Initially, "our response was naive," Frazer said. "Within three months not only was then-Cardinal [Bernard] Law not welcoming our help, but actively shunning us."

Frazer described the sex abuse crisis as a "cancer in the system" that had to be eliminated.

One major accomplishment, however, is that now "people talk about child abuse all the time," Fox said. "People are more educated and children are now more willing to tell their parents."

Nevertheless, Fox said, the organization has to make a crucial transition from reflexive reaction to constructive action. "We've all increased our awareness [of abuse and cover-up], we've all heard and met with survivors, and we've all read about Vatican II," she said, referring to the reform council of the 1960s that permitted wider participation in the church by laity.

"Catholics have to recognize that the clergy sex abuse crisis is also a crisis of secrecy. We have seen with devastating results that if we do not have accountability, we are destined to have abuse," she said. "The church has the capacity to be a unique force for good in the world, but only if the church itself is healthy, accountable and transparent."

One action arena already identified is to work more closely with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board, as well as its Office of Child and Youth Protection. Currently, the bishops are monitoring their own compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which the prelates put into place in Dallas in 2002. Contributions of laypeople in that ongoing effort could strengthen it, Fox said.

While Voice of the Faithful previously has largely avoided controversial dogmatic and doctrinal issues, this summer it took on the matter of mandatory celibacy. The group called for the Vatican to review the requirement for priests to be celibate, a practice John Ryan of Bloomington, Ill., who chairs Voice of the Faithful's priest support working group, termed a man-made discipline.

Ryan was quick to point out that the organization is not calling for married priests. Rather it wants "an ecclesiastical review of mandated celibacy for diocesan priests," he said.

Opposing a cardinal

In an even bolder move, Voice of the Faithful recently urged that Chicago's Cardinal Francis E. George, likely to be elected new head of the U.S. bishops' conference, not be placed in a national leadership position. "The U.S. bishops cannot elect a known enabler of clergy sex abuse as president of the USCCB if they are ever to regain the trust of American Catholics," Fox said in a statement.

She argued that George exhibited a "fundamental lack of understanding of the impact clergy sex abuse has on children, the seriousness of each accusation, and the need for swift action" in the case of Fr. Daniel McCormack against whom credible allegations were made. Earlier this year, the Chicago chapter declined to call for George's resignation.

Whether the group moves forward in tiny increments or seeks to effect major change within the church, its membership is deeply rooted in the institution it wants to reform.

According to the 2006 study of Voice of the Faithful by D'Antonio and fellow researcher Sulpician Fr. Anthony Pogorelc, both of the Life Cycle Institute of The Catholic University of America, 70 percent of Voice of the Faithful members had a parochial elementary school education, 61 percent a Catholic high school education, and 58 percent attended a Catholic college or university. "Not only important and surprising," D'Antonio said. "It's extraordinary."

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