

VOTF VALEDICTORY

Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport announces its intention to disband after its final meeting in May. Its aging members are no longer able to continue their work of reform and renewal.

In the wake of the crisis of priestly sexual abuse, VOTF was formed in 2002 with the desire 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.” Our three goals are: “to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse; to support priests of integrity; and to shape structural change within the Catholic Church.”

Believing that when one part of the Body of Christ, the Church, suffers, all the members also suffer, we wrote to Bishop William E. Lori in June 2002 expressing our desire to collaborate with him and the priests of the diocese in restoring the image of the Church, so badly tarnished by this scandal. In response Bishop Lori, through his representatives, on August 12, 2002 falsely accused us of adhering to doctrines contrary to the orthodox teaching of the church, and prohibited us from meeting in our parishes. All our subsequent efforts to enter into dialogue with him were ignored.

Contrary to Bishop Lori’s attempt to blacken our reputation, our members are faithful and courageous Catholics concerned for the well-being of our Church. Our members have served and continue to serve our Church and our parishes as eucharistic ministers, lectors, catechists, liturgy planners, ushers, pastoral and finance council members, and so forth.

As members of the People of God, sharing in the sense of the faith, according to the Second Vatican Council, we concluded that we had a duty to speak out about priestly sexual abuse and the cover-up by our bishops, and the other issues facing our Church today. Fortunately, the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk, in a wonderfully ecumenical gesture, opened its doors to our meetings.

Since our founding in 2002 we have developed a program of Christian Formation for Adults without parallel in the Diocese of Bridgeport. Since August 2002 we have gathered monthly to listen to and support survivors of priestly sexual abuse and also to hear and engage in dialogue with distinguished theologians from the Catholic Colleges and Universities in the metropolitan area. Also, in collaboration with Paul Lakeland, Director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, we have convened an annual conference since 2003 with such notable theologians as Richard McBrien, David O’Brien, Francine Cardman, John Baldovin, S.J., and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.

As VOTF’s third goal is to enable the faithful to participate in the governance of our Church, we developed Five Proposals for Structural Change: the Election of Bishops; the Role of the Faithful in Choosing their Pastors; Diocesan Pastoral and Finance Councils; Parish Pastoral and Finance Councils; and the Right of the Faithful to Own Church Property.

After the Connecticut courts unsealed records relating to priestly sexual abuse and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear Bishop Lori’s appeal, we composed a dramatic presentation of those records, entitled “Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned!” Its purpose is to give voice to the voiceless, the children who were molested, and to offer them a measure of compassion that our Church long denied them. It also holds accountable not only predatory priests, but also our bishops and their subordinates who, in their zeal to avoid scandal, failed to protect the little ones among us.

As we now give VOTF honorable interment, we can take pride in our accomplishments. We have kept the faith and changed the Church. As our declining energy prompts us to close this chapter in our lives, we turn to the younger generation to take up the task of reform and renewal. When the changes that we seek come, as indeed they will, we can rejoice in having helped to bring them about. From the perspective of future ages, we will be recognized in that company of reformers who changed the Church.