

Svea Fraser spoke for Goal #2 – To support priests of integrity  
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We never speak of Goal 2 without first acknowledging its connection to Goals 1 and 3, for without the revelations of abuse and cover up and the courage of the victim/survivors who shared their stories, we would never have been catapulted from our pews, and moved to action: To help prevent future abuse, and to promote healing and renewal, collaboration between and among laity and the ordained is imperative: in seeking justice for victims we must also insist on justice for those accused. The structural changes necessary for transparency and accountability include a cultural change in the way laity and clergy relate to one another.

The dilemma of Goal 2 is that although it is priests who abused children, and bishops who covered it up, it is priests who played an integral part in the genesis of VOTF.

After the horrific headlines in the Boston Globe, beginning on January 6, 2002, our pastor, Fr. Tom Powers, was approached by Jim Muller and others who were outraged by the revelations. Fr. Tom, during a homily at Sunday Mass, challenged us to use our voices, and offered the microphone for anyone who wanted to speak out after Mass. The outpouring of anger and the sense of betrayal was palpable. But just as tangible was the recognition that the crisis was not a matter of faith—our faith in the church was strong: our faith in the flawed leadership was badly shaken.

So many people wanted to join in the conversation that Monday evening meetings were organized to welcome others to pray, listen and speak. Early on, we were concerned that Fr. Tom would suffer repercussions for his support, and were surprised to learn that there had been no communication whatsoever from the chancery since the news had broken. Fr. Tom did not seem to be as concerned with the reaction from the hierarchy as he was with his shepherding of the people in the entire parish--not all of whom were supportive of our efforts.

When it came time to articulate our mission and goals, we had little trouble reaching consensus. There is no doubt that our prayers and openness to the Holy Spirit guided our deliberations. Working groups were established, and although Goal 2 wasn't the biggest "draw", a group of committed people met to consider ways to accomplish this goal.

The first step was to listen to the very people we sought to support. The Winchester Affiliate designed an excellent anonymous survey of priests in the diocese. We organized what were called "Sounding Boards" which provided forums for better understanding between priests and laity.

Those priests who were willing to meet with us (and there were quite a few), expressed feelings of sadness, shock, disbelief and betrayal. Some felt uncomfortable wearing a Roman collar. Most were demoralized, and felt not only let down by their fellow priests who had fallen, but by the hierarchy who gave them little support.

We wondered if any of the priests knew about abusive priests, and if so, why they hadn't said anything (a question that, in itself, took courage to ask). One answer was, "we had our suspicions, but we were told it was being taken care of."

We were criticized for the wording of the goal, for its being "judgmental" and "unchristian", but after weeks of soliciting alternatives with no satisfactory option, no change was made: A priest of integrity is both a man of the church and his own man.

We also heard the following quotes from priests at various Sounding Boards:

"Thank you for asking us!"

"Please don't patronize us."

"Work within the official church, and avoid polarization."

"Raise consciousness about the role of the layperson in the life of the Church today, which requires education and imagination."

"Be sensitive to the fact that the local parish is where the rubber meets the road for most Catholics, and that the local pastor is often times overwhelmed, understaffed, overworked, and underpaid."

"Priests need to know they are loved, too. We are a church of forgiveness."

"Priests are trained to be servants but with ordination they are given power, and service and power become confused."

"Keep doing what you're doing."

We have been supported, guided, encouraged and challenged by priests throughout the past three years in VOTF. To name just a few:

Our canon law consultant, Fr. Ladislaz Orsy, s.j.,

the late Fr. Bob Bullock, leader of the Boston Priests Forum,

Fr. James Scahill, recipient of the New England 2004 Priest of Integrity award,

Fr. Don Cozzens, writer, lecturer, mentor and friend of VOTF

Fr. Tom Doyle, o.p., our first named Priest of Integrity

and another honored priest, the late Msgr. Phil Murnion, promoter of the Common Ground Initiative..

In short, none of us would be here today if it weren't for priests who have made a difference in our lives....

But we have come to know that the priests' position of privilege has proven to be a barrier to honesty and openness in our interactions. David Gibson, author of "The Coming Catholic Church", wrote a mandate for our collaborative efforts:

"Understanding clericalism and transforming that mentality is the single most urgent

priority for the coming Catholic Church...The better our understanding of the meaning of the priesthood and the ways that it is changing, the better the chances of emerging from the dark night of the soul with a renewed church”

Fr. Tom Doyle adds, “It is tragic that it took a nightmare such as the clergy abuse scandal to cause the laity to awaken from the spiritual coma induced by clericalism...It is time to be adults in the church by acknowledging our irrational fears that have caused us to bow in deference to those who are ordained.”

If Goal 3 is about structural change, Goal 2 is about cultural change: The best way we can support priests is to eradicate the mindset that they are different, separate and privileged. This is not to deny due respect for their specific role, but it is to claim our particular role, conferred in baptism, as members of the universal priesthood.

In subtle and not so subtle ways, each of us laypersons has contributed to the clerical culture by our deference: After all, we were trained in obedience and acquiescence. And, what do we know about seminary selection and formation? It is time to grow up and to assume our rightful roles if we are to rebuild trust and renew the Church.

Beginning this very day, we can examine our behavior around members of the clergy: Do we have the courage to challenge them, and to do so with kindness and compassion? Do we say to a priest what we would say to another lay person? Do we set them apart, and think in terms of “us” and “them”? We must resist the temptation to draw lines between the ordained and the non-ordained, between the hierarchy and the laity. The church is not “us and them”: It is all of us, living stones, an edifice of the Spirit, a holy priesthood, a community of love.”

**Our brother--Father--Don Cozzens tells us that at ordination the newly ordained responds “Ad Sum” (“I am present”) to the bishop. He suggests that today priests need to say “ad sum” to the gospel, to conscience and to our church. And the day has come for God’s holy people to state “ad sum” to the universal priesthood. It is time for us to stand and say, “I am here. I am present as a full, equal, adult member of the church—and I expect to be treated as such by church authorities.” This is our task. Ad sum!**