

Prayerful Voice Working Group Panel presentation by Susan Troy:

It was in a church basement. You know; you can picture it – the linoleum floor, the stacks of metal chairs, the pillars interrupting the space, the fluorescent lighting. It was our upper room. The chairs were arranged in a circle that grew and grew, maybe 60 people. We were drawn there by our disbelief at the horrifying revelations of sexual abuse and cover-up by our priests and bishops. One by one we spoke. We answered the question, “Why are you here?” We desperately needed to speak, to give voice to our anger, our disbelief, our sadness. We listened to each other and it helped. One by one we heard about faith in the Church shaken, but our own faith, our belief, surprisingly, was still strongly anchoring us to Christ. It was our Pentecost. In the days, weeks and months to come, we spoke of the palpable presence of God in our midst, of the power of the Spirit holding us together, supporting and enriching our faith. Out of pain and disbelief, came a new belief . . . a belief that as people of faith, as Catholics struggling to be faithful, we needed to act, to be part of the healing and reconciliation that needed to happen in our Church.

As we continued to gather, we prayed. We spoke of the Holy Spirit, of our recognition that we were not alone, that we were accompanied, that we were strengthened by the Spirit that moved in us and among us. We prayed together because we felt individually and as a group, that the Spirit led us. It was through the authority and power of the Spirit, that we enunciated our truth, that we moved forward, that we were faithful.

Prayerful Voice is the working group that was formed with the intention of helping VOTF remain faithful to its mission statement; to help keep prayer at the center of all our actions and activities, to help provide occasions of prayer and discernment that would strengthen us in the Spirit. Prayerful Voice, like all of the other working groups was born to support the mission and goals of VOTF. And it is Prayerful Voice that specifically addresses the VOTF mission statement. The entire VOTF membership, albeit rather small at the time, worked in consensus to establish our mission statement “to be a prayerful voice attentive to the Spirit” and not just a voice, but a *prayerful* voice. I remember when the hand was raised to suggest the phrase “attentive to the Spirit.” It was an important moment. It was one person’s enunciation of what we all knew; that it was in discerning the Spirit at work in our fledgling group that we felt confident that we were proceeding in a faithful manner, that we were being a prayerful and faithful voice

One of the first actions of Prayerful Voice was to plan for the celebration of a Mass of Reconciliation. It was an awesome moment in the history of VOTF. Over 800 people from the Boston area filled St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, MA. We prayed for forgiveness, for reconciliation and mostly we prayed for the survivors and their families. It was early on. The wounds were deep and still extremely raw. The tears flowed. The Spirit unified us in our commitment to Christ’s healing love for survivors and their families and for our Church shattered by the sin of sexual abuse and cover-up.

We felt strong that day. We felt clarity that day. And it was because we were united in prayer at the table of the Lord. We learned.

We must keep prayer at the center if we are to succeed, if we are to be faithful to ourselves and to our mission and goals.

Prayerful Voice went on to conduct an International Day of Prayer and Reconciliation, a day-long retreat for the Parish Voice leadership, to help renew and strengthen them along the way, a Mass of Rededication, promulgated many prayers and worked to support the affiliates as they formed. Whereas the early Church had the letters of Paul and the other apostles and leaders to share and to support them, we have had the internet. Prayerful Voice posted all these liturgies and occasions of prayer on the VOTF website, intending them to be templates for others, to be points of prayerful communion among our far-flung membership. We received many wonderful communications from various affiliates telling us of the wonderful graces received when celebrating these liturgies; prayer was connecting us in the most important and vital way.

The prayer sessions for this convocation and the liturgy were very much the work of Prayerful Voice. There is much more to be done in the future. Sr. Betsy Conway is the other half of Prayerful Voice. There is a purple sheet that both Betsy and I have which answers the question “Why Prayerful Voice?” Please ask us for one. It is also found in the literature that is sent to all new affiliates.

Every affiliate should have a Prayerful Voice working group. It is a vital sign and symbol of our understanding that we cannot be a Voice of the Faithful without grounding ourselves in prayer and prayerful discernment. We also need to institutionalize working groups as an important part of the Voice of the Faithful structure – especially in that it is the job of working groups to focus on the mission statement and goals of VOTF – and have substantial support at the national level. VOTF’s strength is the passion and commitment of individuals. The Working Groups provide a place for people’s enthusiasm, commitment and energy; a place for people to “belong” to VOTF in another important way, beyond affiliate meetings, beyond monetary contributions, beyond mere good will. Prayerful Voice has not been graced with IT talents, computer skills have been learned mainly by trying to communicate and keep up with VOTF. Hopefully, as we move forward, and mature as an organization, technical assistance will be plentiful and Prayerful Voice will be able to set up means of communication with members and affiliates all over the country and world. Please read the VOTF Working Groups’ Program Handbook, where you will find many suggestions on how to work to keep prayer at the center in your affiliate, in your work for VOTF. Let us always hold each other in prayer. In prayer, with prayer, because of prayer, we can always truly be a Movement of the Spirit. God Bless you.