

President's Report to the National Representative Council

By

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Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. My plan this morning is to share with you an update on what I have been doing and present my views on Voice of the Faithful's future direction. Right now our focus is the campaigns.

Update

Voice of the Faithful has been making a difference. I attended a Gathering in Kentucky with the affiliate leaders from Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana. We spent part of the morning celebrating VOTF accomplishments and they were many from educating the laity to helping change the laws. I attended a meeting of the Connecticut and Rhode Island affiliate leadership and heard how each of those affiliates are initiating action in support of financial accountability and the voice of the laity.

In September I participated in a Conference at Catholic University titled: The Church in America 2006. The first day focused on sociologists reporting on their findings concerning the Church and its future. All of them pointed to the Laity as the only viable answer to ensure the Church is there to minister to her people and the world.

Yesterday I delivered our petition to Bishop Aymond of Austin Texas in Baltimore. Bishop Aymond heads up the committee for the protection of children and young people for the USCCB. It was a good meeting. Bishop Aymond gets it. He received the petition on behalf of the committee and we had a discussion that lasted a good forty minutes. Bishop Aymond said that the majority of Bishops understand that the crisis is not over. He is committed to ensuring the Charter is implemented fully. It was a good meeting.

Where we are headed

The idea of changing the church woke some people's dreams of a Church that would fulfill all of their desires whether that be married priests, women priests, a democratic church or whatever else they might have found missing they hoped that this would be the time for that reform. Some members were already members of other reform groups and hoped that they could combine their efforts into one organization that could do it all. This is what we are seeing now with the pushing of different agendas – women's ordination being the one that has gotten the most attention lately.

We have done much but there is much left to be done – we are a long way from achieving our mission statement. It is very difficult to accomplish the reform we seek when so many are distracted and divided by what our organization should be, could be, and must be.

There are Catholic reform organizations for every change that a person might like to see in the Catholic Church today. Most of them are focused on providing a place for like-minded people to collaborate and discuss issues. Some promote awareness of their issues. As far as we can tell most cannot be attributed with driving real change in the Church. And maybe when I am finished today if we agree we might need to change the term from reform to action or change agent for ourselves.

If Voice of the Faithful wants to be successful in forging change within the Church then we need to work within the Church for that reform. Pope John XXIII said in *Pacem in Terris*: "To proceed gradually is the law of life in all its expressions; therefore in human institutions, too, it is not possible to renovate for the better except by working from within them, gradually." This is our uniqueness – working from within the Church. When we look objectively at what we need to do in order to change the church and keep the faith – we must inspire more laity to embrace their baptismal responsibilities and we must get the bishops to recognize and accept our help. We need to do both we cannot achieve what we hope to achieve without both. To do this we must develop an outward focus. I feel that we have spent the last year focused inward trying to get the organization to run properly. And though I know many if not all of us have felt some frustrations with this we have increased communications across the country.

NOW is the time to decide where we are heading – what we must accomplish in order to realize our mission statement and goals.

My vision for VOTF is that within 5 years through VOTF's direct action campaigns and publicity church leaders recognize and accept responsibility for the survivors of clergy sex abuse and increase support for priests of integrity as more laity begin to accept their baptismal responsibilities.

In looking at the change we want to have happen in our Church, focusing on those items where all can agree first will give us a better chance of success. I would put forth that our mission statement of providing a prayerful voice for the laity to have a role in the governance and guidance of the church along with our goals of supporting survivors and priests of integrity and working for structural change in the church so a crisis like the clergy sex abuse crisis could never happen again is where we are all in agreement.

Individuals may want to see other changes but we all agree on this. Voice of the Faithful was born out of a strong sense of faith and a commitment to right the wrongs our Church had done with the clergy sex abuse crisis. Many would agree that the clergy sex abuse crisis is a symptom of a broader issue, which would allow something like this to happen. To fix those broader issues we need to work for structural change. Until we have a moral church, which supports survivors and has the laity involved in all levels of governance we cannot expect any other changes to happen.

By bringing up other reform issues we dilute our impact on the most paramount issues before us. It becomes easy for those in the pews as well as those in the hierarchy to discount us as those people who want to change this or that or everything. Anyone that stands up and says that they would not support protecting children would be questioned in terms of their morality.

The first rule of successful change management is to make the change manageable – don't initiate change that in itself will be overwhelming to the parties involved. If you do initiate overwhelming change people will either run out of fear that they cannot handle it or dig in their heels in resistance and fight you every step of the way. Neither of these alternatives gets you to the point where the change you are looking for is successfully implemented. On the other hand if you break up the change into manageable components that are tackled over time you can achieve all of your objectives.

We are living in a unique time in history. Our Church leadership is called into question because of how they handled the abuse crisis and the Church is experiencing a real priest shortage. For the Church to survive it needs the laity. Placing us in administrative roles throughout all layers in the church will provide the church with expertise it does not currently have and provide the laity with the first step to a voice.

VOTF has a number of strengths and a few weaknesses. The strengths include: commitment to the Church, commitment to change, action oriented, highly educated, and

working for justice has always been a catholic way of life. Our weaknesses are few: lack of unity and anger turned inward. If we are to be successful we must correct our two biggest weaknesses: side agendas and anger/disrespect toward one another. No one wants to join an organization where it seems like the members are mean-spirited and constantly angry at one another. And I have to admit that in traveling around the country speaking to different affiliate groups and members I find that there is a sense of community there – I do not find the same disrespect and bullying I find on the list serves. List serves are not the method of choice for communicating issues that touch one's heart however it is what it is and with our geographic dispersion it is the best method we have found thus far to communicate. I do believe that some of the anger would be eliminated if we all agreed on where we are headed. For this reason it is Critical that we all come to agreement on this.

I do believe the day will come when we will see most if not all of the changes we dream of in our Church but it might not be in our lifetime and we have to resolve that that is the case. For now we need the laity involved in a lay role. By this I mean – pastoral ministers, pastoral councils, finance councils, lectors, CCD teachers, RCIA teachers, Eucharistic ministers and the list goes on. We do not need to put more people in roles that require a vow of obedience to a system that doesn't work. We need to fix the system first.

This is not easy stuff we are about – the hierarchy is resistant to change that involves loosening their grip on power, and the laity has been trained to be complacent. But it can be done if we focus on the right things. Here are my thoughts:

- First we must create a faith community where spirituality is the basis of all we do. This must be more than prayer at the beginning and ending of meetings. This must be done at the national and affiliate level. Affiliates will be key to forming this community but members should feel part of this community whether they are part of an affiliate or an individual member. Community will give us the strength and fortitude to persevere.

- We need to direct our focus Outward. We cannot expect the change we want to happen if the only people we interact with or worry about who is doing what are all within VOTF. To achieve our mission statement and goals we must do two things: 1) inspire other Catholics to take up their Baptismal responsibilities and 2) we must influence clergy and the hierarchy to accept our help. We need to have a faith-based approach with all we do. We cannot afford to become ideological in our approach. We need to be inspirational – leading Catholics to follow our example as we take up our baptismal responsibilities. This is new for Catholics – we moved to more involvement in the Mass after the change from Latin to the local language but we spent a millennium and a half being very

detached and just watching a performance called Mass. This will take some work.

- Affiliates will be the primary place where direct action will occur and where we will influence other Catholics as well as the clergy and hierarchy. VOTF needs to provide leadership in initiating this Action – it will take action to drive the changes needed. Right now we have many who are afraid of action. We need to figure out how by basing our movement in faith we can inspire the pew catholic to take part in action and accept their baptismal responsibilities. As part of the Accountability Campaigns we have recommended actions at Pentecost and now in the Fall. At Pentecost we had 13 affiliates participating now we have 39 (3 times as many are engaging in action).

Some of this will be accomplished by education and much of it by dialogue. And both the education and the dialogue will need to be directed at lay Catholics, clergy and the hierarchy.

- VOTF National must provide the affiliates with leadership, support and tools to carry out the direct action. The Working Groups will be the primary place where tools are developed. Needs for tools should be directed to the Working Groups.

NRC members being the closest direct link to the affiliates in their region need ensure that the affiliates are aware of the materials available to them. The NRC is also a primary source for consolidating the needs of the affiliates, which will then be communicated to the Officers and Working Groups for development.

The Officers and the Executive Director will provide the National Voice to the media and conduct the business of the organization. Ensure that the products produced by the Working Groups are shared with the membership and is consistent with our mission and goals.

The Board of Trustees will provide oversight to the organization.

VOTF National will also provide the connection for the non-affiliated members. The NRC will communicate with non-affiliate members in their region ensuring they are informed of local direct action in which they may want to participate and national action that is being conducted. The Officers and the Executive Director will communicate national action to all members through the website, In the Vineyard and letters to the membership.

We need to build our legitimacy as the primary organization that speaks for lay Catholics in the broadest terms. To accomplish this we need to build our media

contacts and educate Catholics on what we do, clearing away the misconceptions, and keeping focused on our mission statement and goals.

Internally VOTF must be a community of Catholics united in our focus. Faith and love of one another must be our guiding force. We will be a truly Catholic organization, a home for people with different perspectives and orientations who come together in a focused effort to advance our mission and goals. We will not drive alternate agendas we will leave that to other organizations. There are more than 66 Catholic Reform Organizations that already take up the role of promoting all of the other possible changes the Church could undergo we need to leave those reforms to them.

- We cannot forget that in order to do our work we need to raise funds. We have talked in the past about how VOTF is in that limbo area between \$500,000 and \$1M in annual revenues. The reason this position is so precarious and frustrating is that we are big enough that there is a demand for more support and yet we do not have the funding to provide that support.

All members of the leadership team: Board of Trustees, Officers and NRC members need to play a role in this area. This role can be participating in fund raising, or identifying development team members from your constituencies. But

until we can raise the money needed to provide the support that is required our members will continue to be frustrated and we will continue to focus inwardly.

- Policy – there has been a push to establish more policies. And I think that we are all operating on different definitions of policy. I believe Policy pertains to the high-level overall plan embracing the general goals, and acceptable procedures of an organization. Policies are internal guidelines because we can only control ourselves. If we all agree our focus is on our mission statement and goals then they form the basis for our policy. Policy over and above these should be kept to a minimum. Our efforts should not be on establishing more rules for people to follow but rather providing leadership inviting all to embrace their baptismal responsibilities and be moved to action.

I am working on a draft strategic plan for Voice of the Faithful. I welcome your input and that of the Board of Trustees. I ask that we do this thoughtfully but quickly as well. We must all be on the same page with a similar vision of the Church in its next stage of renewal. We might have different visions of the Church 100 years down the road. Now we must focus on what we envision the Church to be like in the next 5 to 10 years.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

