

In the Vineyard

November 30, 2006

"In almost twenty years of counseling hundreds of victims of sexual abuse by priests, I can say that the first thing each wanted was to be understood, to be believed, to be nurtured by their church. Not one victim thought first of filing a lawsuit." *SNAP Philadelphia* quoting Fr. Tom Doyle as the recent legislative win for protecting children moves toward law in Pennsylvania.

In this issue:

NATIONAL News Update: Accountability Campaign Advent reflection; VOTF National Representative Council pushes for disclosure of clergy abuse cases submitted to Vatican;
DIOCESE/State Watch:

Philadelphia, PA – Despite the hard work of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference to defeat Senate Bill 1054, the House passed S.B. 1054 by a vote of 191-1. Gov. Rendell expects to sign it into law making its passage a huge win for protecting children; **New York, NY/Erie, PA** – secret trial is over but the claimant is talking. He refused to sign a statement of confidentiality; **Wilmington, Delaware** – VOTF Coastal Delmarva is encouraged by the recent “step forward” in the Diocese of Wilmington, which has released the names of diocesan priests accused of sexually abusing children; the diocesan action prompted the O’Connell family to remove Bishop Saltarelli’s name from their pending lawsuit; **Los Angeles, CA** – once again, what did they know and when did they know it? Questions are mounting around sexual abuse allegations a month before parents were notified by the Los Angeles Archdiocese; **Burlington, VT** – an archdiocesan attorney has stepped down amid claims that he “hid” Church documents during a clergy sexual abuse case; **Rockville Center, NY** – *Newsday* reported the arrest of a priest on child pornography charges. SNAP’s David Clohessy says, “Like so many others, this case shows that the Catholic church’s sex abuse scandal is far from over.”

Commentaries – “Dissent: Watching our Language”; in our NEW! Theologians’ Corner, VOTF vice-president Sally Vance-Trembath and VOTF secretary Gaile Pohlhaus comment on “Servants of the Gospel; Servants of the Church”; the second installment of Fr. Collins’ essay “Thomas Merton on Ecclesial Reform and Renewal” (the full text is now available at <http://www.votfcleveland.org/article1.htm>).

Book Review on David Gibson’s *The Rule of Benedict*; **SITE-Seeing, Etc.** has lots to think about from Tom Doyle, *America* magazine, the *Gloucester News*, and more.

VOTF “Cards”: A “Thank you!” to Susan Troy as the founding chair of VOTF Prayerful Voice resigns; and “Get Well!” to Fr. Jim Sullivan, VOTF Rockaway, NY.

SITE-Seeing, Etc.

Visit SNAP's web site for "What to Do When Your Priest is Accused of Abuse" at www.snapnetwork.org.

The Winchester, MA Area VOTF is again selling Christmas cards this year. All proceeds benefit abuse survivors. For further information, contact Bob Morris at rmrorisvotf@aol.com. The Winchester Area VOTF also wishes to thank the VOTF group at St. Theresa's in Harvard, MA for volunteering to sell cards at their church.

Don't forget to write! – to pthorp.ed@votf.org: What do *you* think of the following?

- Many readers have asked for information about the bishops' recent statement on the reception of Eucharist. That statement is available at <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/index.shtml>;
- the Nov. 30 issue of *America* magazine featured a commentary by Fr. Curry on the current state of the Church "The best and worst of times";
- Fr. Tom Doyle's new comments on the abuse crisis "Reflections on Clergy Abuse: Where We Are Today" can be read at http://www.richardsipe.com/Doyle/reflections_on_clergy_abuse_revised.htm;
- Eileen Ford (VOTF Cape Ann, MA) is worth reading in the *Gloucester Times* "The power of good example" at http://www.gloucestertimes.com/siteSearch/apstorysection/local_story_327120359?page=1. (See excerpt from Quote for our Time).
- Watch for the new movie "The Nativity" – exceptionally well done and a worthy holiday respite. Visit www.thenativitystory.com for special screenings information (your parish, perhaps?) and other details.

Something to think/talk about: As VOTF approaches the fifth anniversary of our 2002 founding, it is rewarding to re-visit some of the papers submitted for the July 2002 convention in Boston. Visit <http://www.votf.org/Convention/papers.html> and let us know what still resonates with you – write to pthorp.ed@votf.org.

QUOTE for our time:

"The collateral damage of the crisis includes good priests and faithful Catholics disgusted and disillusioned by bishops who continue to defy rational rules that govern the rest of us. Those who disagreed with church teachings left a long time ago. It's the hypocrisy of the hierarchy that continues to drive people away from the church today. If the hierarchy understood the power of good example and the limitations of dictatorial arrogance, churches would be overflowing each Sunday." *Excerpt from Eileen Ford commentary in the Gloucester Times at* http://www.gloucestertimes.com/siteSearch/apstorysection/local_story_327120359?page=4.

DIOCESE/State Watch

Wilmington, Delaware: After years of requests and demands from VOTF Delamurva and survivor support organizations, the Archdiocese of Wilmington, Delaware has released the names of diocesan priests accused of sexually abusing children. John Sullivan of VOTF Coastal Delmarva was among those who praised Bishop Michael Salterelli for his courage. The bishop has encouraged religious orders – the Norbertines and Oblates of St. Francis de Sales – to do the same. The list appears on the diocesan web site at <http://www.cdow.org/111606.pdf>. For more on this story as it developed, see the following Delaware Online coverage provided by Skip Sullivan of the VOTF affiliate there:

- <http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061119/NEWS03/61119019>
- <http://delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061117/NEWS/611170365/1006/NEWS>
- <http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2006611170342>
- <http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=200661117002>
- <http://delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Date=20061117&Category=NEWS&ArtNo=611170343&SectionCat=&Template=printart>
- <http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061119/NEWS03/61119019>.
- The O’Connell family has directed their lawyer to remove Bishop Saltarelli’s name from their pending non-monetary lawsuit against several bishops. This makes the first US diocese released from a sexual abuse case. For details, go to <http://biz.yahoo.com/prnews/061121/cgtu050.html?.v=77>.

New York, NY/Erie, PA: The secret trial by the Church of an accused priest from the Archdiocese of New York is over. Daniel Donohue, who accused Msgr. Charles Kavanagh of sexual abuse, refused to sign an oath of confidentiality as the trial opened. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Donohue: “My abuse would never have happened if there hadn’t been any secrecy,” he said. “This is the same secrecy. People have signed these [oaths] for years and years and years.” Go to <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-churchtrial18nov18,0,6517215.story?coll=la-home-headlines>. VOTF members Tom Byrne (Cleveland) along with Ed Friedl (Canton, OH), Kris Ward (Dayton, OH), Ed Wilson (NY) and Francis Piderit (NY), have been leading VOTF's initiative in Erie, PA.

Rockville Center, NY: According to Newsday.com: “Federal agents arrested a Roman Catholic priest based in Roosevelt Friday on child pornography charges after authorities said he stored 1,300 sexually explicit images of children on his rectory computer and engaged in sexually laced chats with detectives posing as teenage boys.” For more details, go to <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/longisland/ny-liporn118,0,1513273.story?coll=ny-li-mezz>.

Los Angeles, CA: According to Associated Press coverage in the *Mercury News*: “After a three-year delay, a court has opened the way for pretrial investigations to begin in more than 100 lawsuits filed by people claiming they were sexually molested by Roman Catholic priests. Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Haley J. Fromholz released the claims for trial after a freeze that stalled discovery and other pretrial investigation.

The freeze was imposed as lawyers for victims and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles spent years attempting to settle more than 570 claims, covering 60 years, without trials. The decision involves 32 priests and only about 20 percent of the claims arising from the church scandal.” See

http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/breaking_news/16047502.htm.

- The *Los Angeles Times* reported: “A months-long delay in notifying parents about sexual abuse allegations at a Catholic high school raised questions Friday about whether the Los Angeles Archdiocese violated its own reform policies in molestation cases.” Go to <http://www.latimes.com/news/print/edition/california/la-me-malburg18nov18,1,6244698.story?coll=la-headlines-pe-california>.
- The *San Francisco Chronicle* reports: “The bishop of the Santa Rosa Catholic Diocese [Daniel Walsh] has agreed to undergo a four-month counseling program rather than face misdemeanor charges for failing to immediately notify Sonoma County law enforcement officials about a priest's alleged molestation of underage boys.” <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/11/21/BAGHLMGU881.DTL&hw=bishop+of+Santa+Rosa&sn=001&sc=1000>.

Philadelphia, PA: A *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial began with a question: “Who will watch over the youngest victims of sexual abuse?” and went on with the news child protection advocates have been waiting for: “Joining the Senate, which acted in June, House members on Wednesday gave their overwhelming support to key changes in Pennsylvania’s child sex-abuse laws.” See <http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/news/editorial/16032522.htm>. *New York Times* post-trial coverage is at

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/18/nyregion/18priest.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

Survivor Marie Whitehead of SNAP Philadelphia thanked the many who made this legislation happen. Go to www.snapphiladelphia.org.

Burlington, VT: According to the *Burlington Free Press*, “A longtime attorney for the statewide Roman Catholic diocese has withdrawn from the team of lawyers representing the church in a priest sex abuse case pending in Chittenden Superior Court. The withdrawal came as the court was preparing for a hearing today on whether O'Brien should face sanctions, or a court-imposed punishment, for allegedly concealing church documents the diocese was required to share with O'Neill.” For more, go to <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061122/NEWS02/611220303/1007>.

COMMENTARY

Editorial

Dissent: Watching our Language

Every so often an organization or individual will identify VOTF as “nothing but a group of dissenters,” as if this term qualifies our membership for “mass” excommunication. These critics cite various speakers who have addressed VOTF affiliates, such as Roman Catholic theologian Paul Lakeland

(author and Fairfield University's 2005 Teacher of the Year), or they will hearken back to a panelist (one of about 20) at our first convention four years ago. Critics will even pick through a newsletter to identify independent thinking or postings of discussions (books, conferences) that challenge the docility of mind so long favored, and now sorely missed, among Catholic laity. In doing so, the very real difference between dogma, which is infallibly held, and Church teachings, gets blurred. The Church recognizes this distinction; it is time that *all* the faithful share in the understanding. First, however, let's consider a brief look at dissent.

Dissent Has Prospered Our Faith

There is a fortuitous history in our Church of many a new idea that has righted grave wrongs in Church teachings, made our Church more truly "catholic", and prospered our faith. Critics of dissenters do the Church a great disservice; our Church has, blessedly, changed its teaching and understanding on some of the greatest issues of its time. Usury, Copernican theory, divorce, slavery, our Jewish siblings, religious freedom, human rights, capital punishment – all of these teaching moments surfaced at the hands of faith-filled dissenters whose arguments were first rejected and later embraced by the Church.

Many of these "teaching moments" began with dissent not from infallibly held doctrine but dissent toward a Church teaching. The *aggiornamento* introduced in Vatican II invited Catholic laity, even expected us, to join in the caretaking of our faith. Discussion of all issues of concern held among ourselves and shared with the entire Church seems the only rational response to that call. Until that forum is a reality, labeling will keep dialogue in "lock down."

Faithful questioning is a central feature of responsible Christian Catholic behavior. Often, the Church's opposition to one or the other of dissenters' positions was grounded in the challenge to the Church's authority and less so on the substance of the argument; there was an initial refusal to hear, to engage, and to remain "at the table" on the part of Church officials. That reality did not stifle voices of conscience that have marked every century of Church history – including our own.

The Church Recognizes Dissent

Like others before us, VOTF *does* question particular behaviors that have put children in jeopardy, fostered hostility between lay Catholics and the ordained, and effected the alienation of countless thousands of Catholics of all ages. We are not the first to care enough about our Church to take on these hurdles; we will not be the last.

In 1968, US bishops wrote in a pastoral letter "Human Life in Our Day" that dissent might be legitimate under three conditions: 1) it is based on serious reasons; 2) it is respectful of teaching authority; and 3) it does not cause scandal (scandal is defined as "conduct that gives moral offense to others, incites others to do evil or provides others with an occasion for morally wrong conduct").

Is demanding a voice for the People of God in the conduct of our Church rightly called "dissent"? We think not (see Theologian's Corner – "Servants of the Gospel; Servants of the Church"). By the Church's definition, this claim for a voice in our Church is serious, respects the Church's teaching authority and is not scandalous. If anything in our Church over the past century can be called scandalous, it is the crimes against children perpetrated for decades by clergy and covered up by bishops. A close second would be the absence of engagement by bishops with the laity – the recent statement about Eucharist ([link](#)), for one example, was another opportunity missed for "communion"

between bishops and the rest of us. Our lived faith is *essentially* in and of community. Voice of the Faithful does not challenge that definition; we *seek* it in Church leadership.

Inherent Challenges for Dissenters

Dissent is no “easy out” for Roman Catholics. There are levels of authority, even in non-infallible Church teachings; some non-infallible teachings are “more non-infallible” than others, which is to say that some non-infallible teachings are more approachable than others. Clearly, history supports this understanding. VOTF secretary Gaile Pohlhaus notes a principle that recognizes the relative importance assigned to various Christian doctrines/teachings: “...in Catholic teaching there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith.” (Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 11). However, to this day, these levels of authority in Church teaching are not universally codified.

Language, while technically the same (in this case, English), is often challenged as if it were foreign and the point being made is lost in a morass of “Church-ese” or genuine ignorance – among the laity *and* within the hierarchy. Things are not as clear cut as one might need them to be; dissent or even a simple question is lost in nuanced listening. Too, “wishful thinking” and the selective use of texts threaten genuine understanding and abiding consensus. If our Church has been and can be wrong, so can the faithful err.

Mutual respect is meaningless without dialogue and mutual benefit impossible. One diocese welcomes female altar servers and another won’t even discuss the subject. One diocese refuses Eucharist to a politician and another doesn’t. One parish welcomes inquiry and the sharing of information and another is offended by the question. One diocese or parish bans VOTF from meeting on Church property and another attends VOTF meetings and works with our members side by side. The USCCB issues statements that presumably impact our faith lives but where is the lay input? How do we navigate as a true community of believers with so many competing charts? If dioceses operate like fiefdoms, how might *anyone* expect uniformity of conviction at all?

The Good News

Profoundly significant teaching moments that grew out of dissent have prospered our Church. Even a crisis as horrific as the sexual abuse of children by clergy cannot shake the fundamental, immutable conviction that God holds all of us – dissenters, traditionalists, progressives, reactionaries – in God’s Hands. That conviction grew directly out of dissenters’ arguments on behalf of religious freedom and ecumenism. *PLT*

VOTF welcomes thoughts on this commentary in the spirit of “catholic” Catholicism. Please address your response to pthorp.ed@votf.org.

[For a quick overview on dissent in our Church, see *Rome Has Spoken* by Maureen Fiedler and Linda Rabben and *Faithful Dissenters* by Robert McClory; “dissent” in the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard McBrien. *Vatican Council II, Vol. 1*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P.

“The Canonical Doctrine of Reception” by Academic Dean Emeritus of Washington Theological Union James A. Coriden is available at the ARCC web site: http://arcc-catholic-rights.net/doctrine_of_reception.htm.

“The Future of Dissent in the Catholic Church”, April 2005: An interview with various theologians, including Charles Curran, prior to the election of Cardinal Ratzinger to the papacy is available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4606109>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, Article 6, “Moral Conscience” is at <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s1c1a6.htm>.

An interesting perspective from Australia
http://www.catholica.com.au/peregrinus/022_pere_011106.php

Also, visit the Voice of Renewal/Lay Education pages on the VOTF web site for additional reading.]

Theologians' Corner Models of Faithfulness

Servants of the Gospel; Servants of the Church

Sally Vance-Trembath and Gaile Pohlhaus

The late moral theologian Richard A. McCormick defines dissent as “a judgment of disagreement with an official Church teaching or practice.” By that definition, VOTF does not “dissent” from any teaching or practice that has been officially pronounced by the Church. In fact, VOTF affirms several very important teachings of the Church not the least of which is the full and active participation of the laity in their own apostolic vocation. At Vatican II Catholic laity were called upon to join in the mission of Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church. The opening of *The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People* proclaims:

“Indeed, the Church can never be without the lay apostolate; it is something that derives from the layman’s very vocation as a Christian. Scripture clearly shows how spontaneous and fruitful was this activity in the Church’s early days. No less fervent a zeal on the part of lay people is called for today; present circumstances, in fact, demand from them an apostolate infinitely broader and more intense.”

The founders of VOTF saw themselves as one of these “spontaneous and fruitful” groups who have risen to various challenges in the long life of the Church.

VOTF follows the tradition of laymen and women who were compelled by Jesus’ Gospel to meet the needs they recognized in their own times and places. Dorothy Day felt challenged by the Gospel to give direct help to the poor and oppressed. She co-founded the *Catholic Worker Movement* that continues to perform direct action on behalf of the poor and in efforts towards peace and non-violence. Day was not a dissenter from Church teaching. Indeed, she was a person who asked herself to live-out the teaching of Jesus that proclaims the value and dignity of each and every human person. Cesar Chavez’s work in union organizing was animated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His work on behalf of immigrant farm workers was embraced and supported by many

Catholic priests and bishops. At the time of their deaths many people called Day and Chavez saints.

VOTF encourages all Catholics to study the legacy of these lay people and others like them. They exercised their own vocations of service to Jesus' Gospel by serving the Catholic Church. VOTF's own mission is similar. We were animated by the tragic abuse of children. As a council, Vatican II is our Church's highest form of teaching. We do not disagree with that; we assent to its teaching. We have taken up the charge of the official teaching of our beloved Church to serve it in the areas where we are most competent. We direct our competencies as educated Catholics towards preventing the abuse of children in the future and of supporting those people who have been abused. Many of us have been educated by the Church herself and we wish to use that education to support our pastors and to facilitate the systemic changes that our bishops and two popes called for such a short time ago at the Council. In the *Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church*, the Church declares:

“The faithful should be carefully reminded of their obligation to promote the apostolate according to their state of life and aptitudes, and they should be urged to participate in or assist the various works of the lay apostolate, especially Catholic action. Those associations also should be inaugurated and encouraged which have, either directly or indirectly, a supernatural object such as the attainment of a more perfect life, the preaching of the Gospel to all people, the promotion of Christian doctrine or of public worship, the pursuit of social aims, or the practice of works of piety or charity. The forms of the apostolate should be duly adapted to the needs of the times, taking into account the human conditions, not merely spiritual and moral but also social, demographic and economic.”

VOTF was born because lay Catholics recognized that they have the competence and skills to meet the needs of our time. Indeed, many of our members were trained in Catholic colleges and universities precisely to be able to serve the Church as lay women and men.

We do not dissent. Rather we pray as the Council members did each day: “*Ad sum*, Here I am Lord.” We are here to serve our children and our Church.

BOOK Review

The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World

Reviewed by Catherine McKeen, VOTF NY

On Seeing and Being Seen by Pope Benedict XVI

There are many ways to see a pope. While living in Rome, you might glimpse in a piazza an influential Vatican prefect and future pope who murmurs a mild “buongiorno” as he passes. As a reporter you might travel with the epic Pope John Paul II, or wait with

patient crowds in St. Peter's Square as a conclave of cardinals locked inside the Sistine Chapel chooses his successor.

You might work for Vatican Radio at the center of the church's global communications network. As a journalist, you might conduct interviews with church insiders and research the writings, biography, style, clerical career, and theology of Joseph Ratzinger, today's Pope Benedict XVI.

David Gibson has done all of the above. His book *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World* is the result. And it's a first-rate book, told on the one hand from the perspective of those who see popes like John Paul and Benedict solely in their public roles, and on the other, from those who get an inside view of church structures and personalities at the Roman heart of the universal church.

Given such different ways of seeing, Gibson enlivens his account with details of the Vatican's theatrical landscape, its vestments, headgear, shoes, the drama of a new pope's appearance on a balcony, and the sublime majesty of Catholic liturgy. Within that culture and landscape, Gibson situates Pope Benedict's personal history and his twenty-five years at the Vatican as John Paul's defender of orthodoxy before becoming pope himself.

Voice of the Faithful Catholics would do well to spend time with Gibson's Pope Benedict XVI, especially to understand his Augustinian theology; his interpretation of the Second Vatican Council; his powerful role as prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith; his resistance to change; his understanding of church structures; and – perhaps most importantly – his pastoral insularity from the lives of contemporary men and women.

At one point Gibson is struck by Ratzinger's way of seeing, "an image of such affecting loneliness that one's heart goes out to a man who would see himself so alienated from the world."

By two specific measures, Voice Catholics should not be too optimistic about what kinds of church reforms might be accomplished during Benedict's papacy: his treatment of "dissent" while CDF prefect and his reification of existing church structures, making them not amenable to change.

On the dissent issue, Gibson documents the CDF's years-long scrutiny of Fr. Tom Reese and *America* magazine that led to the departure of Reese from the Jesuit journal of opinion within days of Cardinal Ratzinger's elevation as pope. Under Reese's editorial leadership, the magazine provided a forum for a variety of controversial church issues. Church leaders as well as lay Catholics joined in spirited discussion and debate in the magazine pages. "But that was the problem," Gibson writes. "Ratzinger did not want such discussion within the church."

At its inception Voice of the Faithful certainly believed that the sexual abuse scandal and the secrecy and dishonesty of the church's official response called for some kind of adequate reform of church culture and practice.

So it is less than encouraging to read that: "In light of his nature, it seems unlikely that Benedict will offer much in the way of penitential reflection on his record as prefect of the CDF or in the still-pressing matter of acknowledging the church's errors in the clergy sexual abuse scandal."

At its inception Voice leaders called for "structural" change as one of its goals, later developing that concept to mean a more open church with ways for laypeople to exercise their rightful participation in the church decision-making that affects their lives and finances.

Gibson argues that Pope Benedict sees church structures not as something that human beings can reform but as something willed by God and therefore inviolable. "More challenging for proponents of reform," he writes, "is Benedict's extension of the church's divine structure to include not just the hierarchy but the hierarchs themselves...By divinizing the structures of authority in the church so completely, Benedict effectively inoculates the bearers of that authority – the bishops – from personal accountability, except of course to God."

David Gibson's book should be widely read and discussed among Voice of the Faithful Catholics. Then, as antidote, we should read again Jesuit James Martin's "Saints That Weren't" opinion piece in the *New York Times*. There we find ourselves placed in the company of Mother Theodore Guerin, recently canonized by Pope Benedict, and other saints who were at odds during their lives with bishops or even with the Vatican: Joan of Arc, Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius Loyola, Mother Mary MacKillop. We need their company.

The weekend edition (Nov. 25) of the *Wall Street Journal* published an excellent consideration of Pope Benedict. Subscribers can access the article "A Tumultuous World Tests a Rigid Pope" at <http://online.wsj.com/public/us>.

THOMAS MERTON ON ECCLESIAL REFORM AND RENEWAL

This is the second installment of Fr. Collins' essay. See the November 16 Vineyard for the first part.

by Rev. Patrick W. Collins, Ph.D.

For the Church to be authentic, according to Merton, it had to contribute to the forward thrust of humanity because it is the continuation of the Incarnation. He wrote of this in late 1961 and early 1962. To the extent that the Church stands in the way of being a matrix for the humanization of persons and cultures, it may foreshadow the end of Western Christianity. His sense of the human was grounded in the biblical

understanding of persons as the object of divine mercy and special concern on the part of God. In some mysterious sense the Church is “the spouse of God” and “an epiphany of divine wisdom.” But he judged that the institutional Church was, in some ways, far from such an agent of divinization. Rather than being a “body of perfections to be salvaged” it was too often one of “infidelity and imperfection.” He criticized efforts to stress the value and supreme importance of Western Christian cultural heritage, which has become in some ways a religion of abstract formality without a humanist matrix (HGL, 541-2). A large part of the Church’s infidelity to the Gospel lay, Merton thought, in its over-identification with the secular order, thus losing its real Christian center. “Centuries of identification between Christian and civil life have done more to secularize Christianity than to sanctify civil life” (HGL, 649).

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council which began in the fall of 1962, Thomas Merton wrote to Catherine de Hueck Doherty saying that, while he was tired of all of the complaining about the state of the Church, he realized that the Church was experiencing “a terrible spiritual sickness, even though there is always that inexpressible life.” And then he added his own complaints: “What is wanted is love. But love has been buried under words, noise, plans, projects, systems, and apostolic gimmicks... We are afflicted with the disease of constant talking with almost nothing to say... People like to get around the responsibility by entering into a routine of trivialities in which everything seems clear and noble and defined: but when you look at it honestly it falls apart, for it is riddled with absurdity from top to bottom...” (HGL, 19).

During the summer of 1962 the monk, in a letter to an English friend spoke of the Church’s graces and its need for renewal and reform. “What can I tell you about the Church? In a sense it is true that one only comes in with blinders on, blinders one has put on and kept on. One has to refuse to be disturbed by so many things. **The Church is not of this world, and she complacently reminds us of this when we try to budge her in any direction. But on the other hand we also are of the Church and we also have our duty to speak up and say the Church is not of this world when her refusal to budge turns out, in effect, to be a refusal to budge from a solidly and immovable temporal position.. You will have the grace to see through all that is inconsequential and unfortunate in the Church**” (HGL, 397-399).

Merton’s advice in the face of difficulties with the Church was born of his spirituality. **Church reform must flow from the spiritual renewal of the members of the Body of Christ** [bold added]. “Be true to the Spirit of God and to Christ. Read your Prophets sometimes, and go through the Gospels and St. Paul and see what is said there: there is your life. You are called to a totally new, risen, transformed life in the Spirit of Christ. A life of simplicity and truth and joy that is not of this world” (HGL, 397-399).

Monk Merton in June of 1962 held out some hope that the Council would help the Church become more than a kind of ark into which one scrambles to escape life’s flood. Sometimes, he admitted “one can also be tempted to wonder if the ark itself is going to leak or even founder. But God is the one to worry about that.” He spoke at that time for the first time of the Church as the People of God, a metaphor that would come to

dominate the ecclesiological visions of Vatican II. He told a lay woman entering the Church that she would find that she would have some serious work to do because the Council would show how important is the contribution of the laity, the People of God. "The Church is not just an institution for the benefit of priests and nuns, with lay people around to fill in the background. The coming Council, may, we hope, give light and direction on these things" (HGL, 110).

During the first session of the Council, while Thomas Merton continued to express his concern about not "feeling snug in the Church" as an institution - largely due to its "continual complicity with secular interests for purposes of gain for the Church" - he spoke glowingly of the holiness of the Church from a spiritual perspective - "the communion of saints in the Holy Spirit" (HGL, 580).

By the end of the session, he judged that the discussions were not radical enough. "The great problem is the fact that the Church is utterly embedded in a social matrix that is radically unfriendly to genuine spiritual growth because it tends to stifle justice and charity as well as genuine inner life" (HGL, 581). Christianity, he feared, "has become a complex and multifarious thing. It takes Chuang Tzu to remind us of essential elements of the Gospel which we have simply 'tuned out'" (HGL, 723). He thought that Christianity had, over the years, done exactly what they had accused the Jews of doing: "finding an earthly fulfillment of prophecy in political institutions dressed up as theocracy... so perhaps we will be humble enough to dig down to a deeper and more burning truth" (HGL, 432).

After the second session of Vatican II, Thomas Merton saw signs of hope in the conciliar discussion of collegial governance in the Church. This was based upon faith in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the entire Church, Head and members of Christ's Body, the People of God. He wrote with some tongue-in-cheek no doubt: "Let's throw out the skeleton for good and all and take off for nowhere with that Vagabond (that notorious illuminist, the Holy Spirit)." This notion Merton found expressed especially in the Russian orthodox notion of sobornost, i.e., the doctrine of the Spirit acting and leading the whole Church into the truth. "Collegiality is a step in that direction," he believed (HGL, 104).

By the summer of 1964, as the third session neared, Merton found himself discouraged and disillusioned about the Church's inability to address important public issues of reform and renewal such as justice, war and peace. The Church seemed "paralyzed by institutionalism, formalism, rigidity and regressions. The real life of the Church is not in her hierarchy, it is dormant somewhere" (CT, 192). To Daniel Berrigan, SJ, he wrote: "It is of course not God's will that a religious or a priest should spend his life more or less in frustration and defeat over the most important issues in the church... I realize that I am about at the end of some kind of a line. What line? What is the trolley I am probably getting off? The trolley is called a special kind of hope... I don't need to be on the trolley car anyway, I don't belong riding in a trolley... As a priest I am a burnt-out case, repeat, burnt-out-case. I am waiting to fall over and it may take about ten more years of writing. When I fall over, it will be a big laugh because I wasn't there at all..."

Where we are all going is where we went a long time ago, over the falls. We are in a new river and we don't know it" (HGL, 83).

VOTF “Cards”

Thank you, Susan

Recently, Susan Troy resigned her place as founding Chair of the Prayerful Voice Working Group.

Before we were “Voice of the Faithful”, we were pray-ers. When the group that would become VOTF gathered in St. John’s late in January 2002, it was Susan Troy who made our transition seamless – from our stunned places in the pews to the tentative margins of voicing our concerns to the global arena of responsible Catholicism. The scope of the abuse crisis was only barely known to us in 2002. When we came together to fathom our way through what we were learning, we began in prayer. It was never otherwise. And woe be to the one who momentarily digressed at a meeting’s beginning (if Susan didn’t “get” you, Sr. Betsy did)!

Members will recall their own appreciation of Susan’s gifts to Voice of the Faithful – many of which have become a standard in VOTF affiliates all over the world. As Catholics often note when traveling, there is great joy in walking in to a Catholic Mass being offered in another language and knowing exactly where you are. In VOTF Australia, Ireland, Canada, and coast-to-coast in the U.S., traveling VOTF members can find the same immediate comfort level in the prayers, liturgies and healing services that gave VOTF such a powerful and enduring prayerful voice.

Get well, Fr. Jim!

Fr. Jim Sullivan is a fierce VOTF supporter and has been an active member of the Rockaway, New York affiliate – even at 86 years old! His "sphere of influence" reaches all over Long Island and then some; two years ago, he was awarded the VOTF-NJ Priest of Integrity Award. Fr. Jim suffered a mild stroke recently and is recuperating at home. While many in VOTF may never have met him, many did meet him at a VOTF meeting or convention. Many more remember him for his long ministry. Fr. Jim is the quintessential pastor, termed an “aging giant” by Dick Ryan in his book *Holy Human*. Just to give you the flavor of being around Fr. Jim, Sr. Cathy Kelly shared the following vignettes from his hospitalization following the stroke:

“Referring to the patient opposite him, I tried to encourage Jim with the fact that the man was totally ‘out of it’ and had no idea what was going on. Jim said, ‘Well, I’m not out of it, but I don’t know what’s going on, either!’”

“In answer to his question about what and why the IV, he was told it was a sodium chloride solution to help bring his blood pressure up to normal. ‘Why don't they just ask me about the Catholic hierarchy? That would do it a lot faster.’”

Your prayers and good thoughts will no doubt be felt by Fr. Jim.

[For a little more about Fr. Jim, check the VOTF New Jersey web site at http://votfnj.org/page.cfm?Web_ID=49 and this *National Catholic Reporter* article: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_30_38/ai_87353894]

