

## VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL - A DECADE OF CATHOLIC ACTIVISM

By James E. Post

Ten years have passed since clergy sexual abuse became an unwelcome mark of shame on the Catholic Church, disgracing its bishops and transforming the laity's understanding of their identity as Catholics. As with the recent Penn State scandal, American Catholics have insisted that clergy sexual abuse does not define who we are, nor what our Church believes. But the image endures.

"Scandal" is the word most often used to describe how the clergy sexual abuse crisis affected the Catholic Church. It is scandalous that thousands of clergy abused their power by sexually abusing thousands of children. It is scandalous that these actions were not reported to police officials by those who knew. It is scandalous that hundreds of bishops and administrators actively covered up so many cases of abuse and protected a legion of perpetrators through relocation, refusal to disclose records, and often stonewalling victims via lengthy and expensive civil litigation.

Countless articles have been written describing the response of victims, attorneys, journalists, bishops, priests, and lay people to this scandal. In my judgment, two words - *faith* and *courage* - best describe the lay Catholic response to the sexual abuse crisis.

Catholics' outrage was born of the *faith* that our church did not endorse, and could not condone, the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. As the *courage* of a few lonely victims of abuse became a torrent, and as more survivors of abuse came forward to share their stories, outrage led to action.

To many of us, the Church simply *had* to change -- it had to ensure that children would be safe, predators prosecuted, and justice be done for innocent victims of clergy sexual abuse. This confluence of faith and courage produced a movement that became a turning point for the Catholic Church. Faith and courage were --and remain-- at the heart of the movement we called *Voice of the Faithful*.

### Shock and Bewilderment

Historian Kathleen Kilgore once observed that "the history of all institutions begins with the stories of individuals." Over the course of a decade, 2002-2012, tens of thousands of individuals made *Voice of the Faithful* part of their personal stories, and in so doing, part of the institutional history of the Catholic Church. *Voice of the Faithful* started as a conversation among Catholic neighbors about the horrors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Revelations reported in *The Boston Globe* (January 6, 2002) about Fr. John Geoghan's abuse of children in parish after parish in the Archdiocese of Boston ignited a firestorm of shock, disbelief, and anger. Like the disbelief and demands for action that exploded around the behavior of coaches and administrators at Penn State University, the allegations of clergy sexual abuse that surfaced in Boston a decade ago ignited a wrenching process of civil, criminal, and institutional action. *Voice of the Faithful* was, and remains, an important part of that story.

*The Boston Globe's* reports revealed the depravity of Geoghan's behavior and complicity of archdiocesan administrators -- including Cardinal Bernard F. Law, who

approved Geoghan's relocations and continued priestly service. Cardinal Law's protection of a "brother priest" exposed the dark side of clericalism: Abusive priests mattered more than innocent children.

The shock of these revelations fueled a righteous anger among Boston Catholics. Parishioners demanded apology, meaningful corrective action, including the resignation of Cardinal Law and others responsible for covering up the facts. But the hierarchy was slow to respond, provoking parishioners to further action. And the dreadful disclosures continued, day-by-day, for many months.

### **A Movement Is Born**

VOTF was a social movement before it was an organization. If the cause was born in the firestorm of revelation, shock, and anger that occurred in 2002, VOTF's mission statement emerged from many hours of conversation among an astonishing number of people who attended the early meetings and shaped *Voice of the Faithful* as a grassroots movement in the Church's social justice traditions. The steering committee included many talented, committed physicians, accountants, professors, social workers, teachers, writers, and more.

Three points remain vivid about these early meetings. First, discussions were passionate but respectful, in part because gifted facilitators shaped consensus from the disparate views and voices. Everyone was heard; everyone's view mattered. Second, leaders continuously reached out to survivors of abuse and thereby broadened - and deepened - our understanding of the severity of sexual abuse. Third, the movement stayed centered in the church's Vatican II teachings with a passionate commitment expressed in six words: "*Keep*

*the Faith, Change the Church.*" Within a few weeks, VOTF became a focused, faith-based movement to press the church for justice for survivors, support for priests of integrity, and structural change to ensure a permanent end to abuse. The mission was for reform, not revolution.

VOTF also took bold action. Its first international conference was organized in less than 90 days and drew an audience of more than 4,000 from across the nation. A lay-administered charitable fund was promoted as an alternative to the Cardinal's Appeal, being boycotted by thousands of Boston's laity. Petitions and letters to Pope John Paul II were delivered to the Vatican, bringing visibility and publicity to the voices of an emboldened laity. Not surprisingly, these actions were not welcomed by Cardinal Law or many priests. But the crowds grew in size and determination.

VOTF members found themselves on a spiritual journey as well. Meetings often opened with a prayer for survivors of abuse that begins, "*We are the Church; we are the Body of Christ.*" Those words speak volumes, emphasizing the unity of attendees with survivors of abuse and with those just awakening to the story of abuse in the Church. These notions of solidarity and community form a basic tenet of this movement within the Church.

### **A Movement Rooted in Love, Not Anger**

In December 2002, following 11 months of unrelenting pressure, Cardinal Law resigned as archbishop of Boston. He was succeeded by Richard Lennon, an auxiliary bishop of Boston, who was named Apostolic Administrator. Lennon's appointment, while temporary, proved fateful, for it forced

VOTF leaders to rethink the organization's direction. Should VOTF step aside and wait for a new bishop to chart a course change?

The answer came in the form of a surge of support from lay Catholics across the nation calling on VOTF to build a national network of affiliates. A new phase of the organization's history unfolded from 2003 to 2006, as VOTF expanded its membership. At one point, there were more than 200 affiliates across the nation. Cardinal Law's resignation marked the end of a phase, but the recognition that what had happened in Boston happened elsewhere. The sexual abuse crisis touched diocese after diocese as Catholics around the country, and the world, were forced to deal with the ugly truth of predatory behavior and scandalous cover-ups. For a decade, the Catholic community has been forced to respond to what has been called one of the worst crises in the entire 2000-year history of the Church.

As VOTF grew, governance became an important issue. Election processes that worked well at early "in person" gatherings, for example, could not accommodate a nationally dispersed grassroots organization. Nor could all members travel monthly to Boston-area meetings to provide input on policy and actions. The bylaws structured on this localized concept did not match the emerging governance needs.

In response, VOTF revised its bylaws to reflect the national, even international, character of the membership. It tested the use of working groups and a representative council to permit long-distance collaboration and consensus. It dramatically increased email communications, and the internet became an indispensable tool for both news distribution and consensus-building.

Assessing the impact of VOTF in this movement for social justice and public accountability is complicated. On one hand, VOTF provided an important forum to which angry Catholics turned for information, serious discussion, and action. But expectations sometimes outstripped the ability of the organization and its leaders to satisfy. We were our own toughest critics. Working groups were created to focus on issues such as child protection and financial reporting. Tangible accomplishments included child protection programs and financial accountability standards that have been shared widely.

VOTF's largest accomplishment has been to move the conversation about clergy sexual abuse among bishops, clergy, and laity toward a new vocabulary including "accountability," "transparency," and "apology." VOTF members have supported organizations directly advancing the cause of survivors. Groups such as SNAP and Bishop Accountability operate with greater effectiveness on the front lines of the war against sexual abuse in part because of this support.

### **Unwavering Purpose**

The organization entered another important phase in 2008 when attention was re-focused on the "roots and branches" of sexual abuse. The Church's clerical culture is recognized as a contributing cause of the crisis and a continuing obstacle to ridding the Church of abuse. VOTF is now addressing the issues of celibacy and the role of the laity in church reform.

While VOTF leaders have avoided any suggestion that the organization is altering its focus on sexual abuse, there is concern among some members and survivor

advocates that attention to sexual abuse may be diluted as other issues are engaged. The counterargument, however, is that the institutional culture that permitted sexual abuse to flourish for so many years is inevitably defined by practices such as celibacy, denial of full participation by women, and hierarchical financial control – control that too many bishops use to quell the voices of their own priests.

A more controversial step was the organization's active participation in the formation of the American Catholic Conference, a coalition of reform groups including Call to Action, Future Church, and others whose policy positions on hot-button issues such as the role of women in the church are outside the scope of VOTF's mission and goals. Once again, leaders concluded that the rationale for engaging in the development of the ACC outweighed the argument for not doing so.

Taken together, these new activities extend the strategy of engagement around the "roots and branches" of sexual abuse. The root causes lie deep within an institutional culture whose prominent features --celibacy and the dominant role of ordained men-- profoundly disturb large numbers of American Catholics. The "branches" of this culture, in turn, also remain troublesome: new allegations of sexual abuse still arise in American dioceses, while evidence of clergy sexual abuse in numerous other countries accumulates.

### **Future of a Social Movement**

What has happened through the work of Voice of the Faithful is the making of a social movement for reform within the Catholic Church. Johan Vink, a student of social movements, has argued that four

factors account for the growth of movements: A compelling vision; supported by constant communication; enthusiastic and willing workers; and a results-oriented structure. He also cautions that related factors may help explain why some movements decline. Failure begins when means become ends; roles become excessively professionalized; methods become unduly traditionalized; and leadership becomes maintenance oriented.

Voice of the Faithful certainly exhibited the four critical success factors during its first decade: The vision was compelling, the communication constant, effectively mobilizing a small army of willing volunteers who shared a deep, passionate commitment to results. Now, as it begins its second decade, VOTF must avoid the pitfalls that can derail social movements.

The key is to reaffirm what made VOTF appealing in its infancy: It remains an organization rooted in the belief that its work is an expression of faith, to be joined with the courage of survivors, priests of integrity, and thousands of lay Catholics willing to risk clerical disapproval in pursuit of social justice.

How the laity responded to clergy sexual abuse is a story of faith and courage. The faith of the Catholic laity was sorely tested in the past decade. Too many children were abused, and too many bishops covered up the crimes, sometimes in defiance of civil court decisions. Grand juries exposed mismanagement and worse by investigating church records made available only under legal subpoena, and what was derided as an "American problem" by Vatican insiders was ultimately revealed to be a problem of the universal Catholic Church.

Few among us could have imagined how the story of clergy sexual abuse would unfold during the decade that began in January 2002. Thousands of victims of sexual abuse have come forward to tell their stories; tens of thousands of Catholics have demanded a full and truthful accounting from the bishops who are entrusted to lead; and the social ramifications of sexual abuse are being understood more widely with each new revelation.

Ten years is too short a time in which to render final judgment on the influence the sexual abuse scandal on the Church, or the impact of VOTF within the church. It is possible, however, to recognize that the events of the past decade helped those who were abused to find their voice and to fuel a process of change that millions hope will bring greater openness and accountability to the administration of the Church. None of these things are certain, of course, and the decade ahead will surely provide new challenges.

Those who were, and are, a part of VOTF have contributed to a movement that raised public consciousness, built awareness of a critical moral issue, and provided energy to change the administrative behavior of the Catholic Church. It may also have helped prepare lay Catholics to think critically about the many contentious moral issues that now seem a key element of American politics.

The institutional church failed the people of God when it covered up the scourge of clergy sexual abuse. Those who misled victims, their families, legal authorities, and the laity betrayed a trust that has not yet been reclaimed. No one can say how long it will take to do so. The only hope is to build

a new basis for trust through action. Transparency and accountability are the new requirements for both those who would lead and those who would follow. The “people in the pews” must expect more and demand more. The responsibility for meeting these requirements falls on the shoulders of both Church leaders and faithful followers. Together, we can *"Keep the Faith and Change the Church."*

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