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October 2, 2015

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Dear Holy Father,

Inspired by your visit to the United States, Voice of the Faithful offers an opportunity to continue conversations already begun and to initiate new conversations on matters significant for faithful Catholics: hearing the voices of real-life families in gatherings like the Synod; healing the many wounds festering from clerical sex abuse; obtaining financial transparency and accountability in our dioceses; and widening lay input into the process for selecting bishops.

Voice of the Faithful has been working towards these goals for more than a decade and we take this opportunity to invite you to join the conversation.

Hearing the voices of real-life families

You invited all Catholics to provide input for the Synod of Bishops on the Family taking place this month. But the questionnaire distributed favored responses that fit only within specified theological and philosophical parameters. It offered little chance for families to identify their greatest needs, both spiritually and personally. Voice of the Faithful gathered responses to two simple questions: "How do you define family?" and "Given what family means to you, how can the Church minister to yours?" We are happy to share these responses with you, in the spirit of dialogue you have invited—responses not from pastors who hear about family life or from carefully selected "showcase families," but from ordinary people living as family in a variety of situations.

Healing the wounds of clerical sexual abuse

Voice of the Faithful is committed to providing healing options for those wounded by the scourge of clerical sexual abuse or by hierarchical failures to respond properly. We focus on Healing Circles as a pathway towards healing—we share the journeys of those wounded: survivors, families, faith communities, those who have left the Church because of the scandals and those who have stayed but cannot understand why our pastors could

not value our children as highly as we do. We do not set out to “reconcile” all to the Church, as do the few healing programs sponsored by dioceses. The first step must be simply to share the journey. We invite you to learn more about Healing Circles and the promise they provide.

Obtaining financial transparency and accountability

U.S. Catholics are among the most generous Catholics worldwide. But for centuries the dioceses have not provided full transparency and accountability for how they spend our dollars. Voice of the Faithful has compiled data from the publicly available records of all U.S. dioceses so that every Catholic has the means for assessing transparency in his or her diocese, and for comparing it with the transparency shown in similar dioceses. We also provide tools for pastors and parish finance councils to ensure that the dollars dropped into the collection baskets actually make it to the bank without losses. Again, in the spirit of developing conversations around matters significant to all the faithful, as you have asked, we invite you to review the data already assembled and to help us improve and expand it.

Widening lay input into bishop selection

Voice of the Faithful has previously provided Vatican officials and U.S. bishops with a proposed pilot test for widening local Catholic lay input into selection of their own bishops. To further the opportunity we also provide an online web portal where U.S. Catholics may send their recommendations directly to the Apostolic Nuncio in Washington, D.C. We know that the “Council of 9” is considering options that could broaden lay input, and we invite you to consider the proposed pilot as well as the utility of an online portal for such input.

We are happy to send you further information on any or all of these initiatives: comments on what family is today; restorative justice Healing Circles; financial accountability; and lay input for bishop selection. Please email our Executive Director, Donna B. Doucette (dbdoucette@votf.org), or call our offices at 1-781-559-3360, or call me directly at 1-617-835-3345 and we will send the information.

Respectfully,



Mark Mullaney
President

P.S. There are many other conversations where the perspectives and ideas of clergy, lay, and religious should expand to renew our Church, and we are happy to discuss those as well. We have members working on these additional projects: monitoring of child-protection protocols in the diocese and parish, enhanced roles for women in the Church, the pastoral provision for ordaining married Catholic men.