



The Bridge Dialogues: *Tackling the Scourge of Clericalism*

Pope Francis has repeatedly called out the clerical culture as a danger to the Catholic Church and its faithful, saying that clericalism is “our ugliest perversion.”

Now a nationwide Catholic priests’ organization and two international lay reform organizations have developed “The BridgeDialogues: Laity & Clergy Re-Imagining Church Together” to show Catholics what they can do to recognize and prevent clericalism that, among its many faults, blocks laity from achieving their full potential in the Church.

The BridgeDialogues is a collaboration of Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, FutureChurch, and Voice of the Faithful. VOTF first identified clericalism as a major cause of clergy sex abuse in 2011, when it assessed the USCCB-sponsored “Study of the Causes and Context of the Sexual Abuse Crisis.” In our critique, we defined clericalism as “an overriding set of beliefs and behaviors in which the clergy view themselves as different, separate, and exempt from the norms, rules and consequences that apply to everyone else in society.”

As Pope Francis has said, “Clerics feel they are superior, they are far from the people,” and clericalism “can be

fostered by priests or by lay people” where the laity show clergy excessive deference because they assume the clergy are morally superior.

The BridgeDialogues’ many resources are available online at bridgedialogues.org. They offer:

- prompts for discussing clericalism;
- examples of how you experience clericalism barriers and what you can do about them;
- tips for how you can guard against clericalism in your own behaviors, while removing the barriers others may use to hold you on “your side” of the lay/clergy divide.

Deborah Rose-Milavec, FutureChurch executive director, said, “Although some form of clerical culture will always

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VOTF’s 2019 Conference: *Creating a Just Church*

The place to be on Saturday, Oct. 19, is the Boston Marriott Newton Hotel for Voice of the Faithful’s 2019 Conference: *Creating a Just Church*. Clergy abuse and cover up and financial malfeasance within the Church have dismayed and appalled many Catholics. Please join us as we explore new possibilities for reform in the Church.

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BridgeDialogues

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be with us as long as we make distinctions between priests and laity, we can all work together to reduce its deleterious effects. The BridgeDialogues provides the resources to begin a dialogue in your parish or community to look at the subtle ways that language and pastoral relationships can feed clericalism and how all Catholics experience those barriers.”

Donna B. Doucette, VOTF executive director, added, “We must make ourselves, priests and laity, aware of a clerical culture that has so many damaging consequences. Many Catholics are unaware of how embedded those effects are. Priests typically live aside and apart from the people they are supposed to serve—they are culturally and often physically far removed from the realities of the

communities that surround them. Yet instead of trying to bridge the separation, too often lay people contribute to it. And some priests, of course, often don’t realize it should be bridged.”

“For our wounded Church to grow,” said AUSCP member Louis Arceneaux, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission living in New Orleans, “we need organizations of women and men, of laity and clergy, to minister together. As an AUSCP member, I am delighted to be working with FutureChurch and Voice of the Faithful in promoting the BridgeDialogues, which affords me personally and our association a wonderful opportunity to be part of an important priests/laity collaboration.”

VOTF Conference

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Presentations will include two major addresses, a panel discussion featuring laypeople making a difference for justice within their parishes and dioceses, and updates by VOTF leaders on our initiatives in diocesan financial accountability and child protection.

Our special return guest speaker will be the Honorable Anne M. Burke, Illinois Supreme Court Justice, who spoke to us at our 10th Anniversary Conference in 2012. She was the second chair of the USCCB’s National Review Board from 2002 to 2004. Much has happened in the clergy abuse scandal since then, and she is now involved with a group advocating accountability for bishops.

Justice Burke will be joined by Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center Exec. Dir. Char Rivette. Together, they will show how CAC can be a model for battling clergy child abuse in your diocese. CAC is Chicago’s front-line responder to reports of child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, and other serious maltreatment. It is the only not-for-profit coordinating the efforts of child protection staff, law enforcement professionals, family advocates, medical experts, and mental health clinicians under one roof. All services are free and aimed at reducing trauma, so children and families may begin healing. Since opening in 2001, ChicagoCAC has served more than 34,000 children.

A second featured speaker will be Fr. Richard Lennan, professor of systematic theology at Boston College. He presently directs Boston College’s sacred theology licenture



program. Together with Boston College theology professors Thomas Groome and Richard Gaillardetz, Prof. Lennan wrote “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood

and Ministry,” which calls for reexamining the formation process for diocesan priests and eradicating the priesthood’s embedded clerical culture. The paper resulted from a seminar begun in 2016 and composed of lay and ordained, women and men, and theologians and ministers, who are working in pastoral and academic settings.

In addition, the conference will feature a panel discussion during which parishioners from the Cincinnati, Ohio, Washington, D.C., and Buffalo, New York, areas will discuss actions they are taking at the grassroots level to help create a just Church. The panel presentations and Q&A will segue into our lunch period when attendees can continue the panel members’ discussions.

Set aside Saturday, Oct. 19, 2019, for Voice of the Faithful’s 2019 Conference: *Creating a Just Church* and register online now at votf.org, where you also will find more information and a link to the conference agenda.

White paper is first collaboration of clergy and laypeople to confront clericalism

The Roman Catholic clerical culture lies at the root of the coverups that mark the clergy sex-abuse scandal and greatly harms its recovery. Barriers that separate clergy and laity lead to numerous other problems in the Church. Recently, however, a group of clergy and laypeople came together in what is believed to be the first substantial collaboration between clergy and laypeople to combat clericalism.



Their white paper, “Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism,” was affirmed during the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests’ 2019 General Assembly in St. Louis the week of June 24. The paper considers the culture of Roman Catholic diocesan clergy in the United States and how that culture often leads to unhappy consequences within the Church, some that are damaging to priests isolated within the culture and others that are disastrous, like clergy sexual abuse and the cover-up by the hierarchy.

Prof. Richard Gaillardetz, Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College, an Assembly speaker, called the document “very informative, even visionary.” Another speaker, Cardinal Blase Cupich of the Archdiocese of Chicago, described the paper as “nothing less than a catalogue of horrors, chronicling imperial pronouncements, put-downs, claims of privilege, entitlements, and exemptions from accountability. But also chronicling how it is a culture that is so pervasive that many of the laity have come to accept it as normal. And yes, even have cooperated in maintaining it.”

Voice of the Faithful, a Church reform organization founded amid abuse reporting in the Archdiocese of Boston in 2002, was a major contributor to the white paper, which points to several ways in which the clerical culture of diocesan priesthood is distinctive from other institutional cultures:

- The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the church;
- Papal allegiance;
- An ordination which is said to confer an ontological change;
- Special and separate education and training;
- Celibacy requirements;
- Clothing and dress—especially liturgical dress; and
- Special privileges concerning compensation and lifestyle.

Using real-life vignettes from across the United States, the document elaborates on each of these distinctions, examines the ways clericalism harms both priests and laypeople, as well as the institutional Church, and explores the evolution of a clerical system that, in the 21st century, poses more problems than in the past.

“Our aim,” the authors say, “has been to raise the consciousness of readers to the expressions of clericalism and its problems. Clericalism betrays the teachings of the scriptures and ignores the best practices of the first three centuries of Christian faith and life. Both clerics and lay persons can be afflicted with the disease. Both are often unaware that their mode and manner, their self-understanding, and their sense of ministry have wandered far from the example of Jesus.”

In conclusion, the authors call all the faithful to action and hope, “Let the dialogue begin and may its outcomes lead us to lasting change.”

“Confronting the Systemic Dysfunction of Clericalism” was produced by the AUSCP, in collaboration with VOTF and laypeople across the country, and endorsed by FutureChurch. The white paper’s contributors were:

- Fr. Gerry Bechard, AUSCP, pastor, Sts. Simon & Jude Parish, Archdiocese of Detroit;
- Alvera and David Bell, parishioners, St. Paul the Apostle Parish, Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio;
- Fr. Bernard R. Bonnot, AUSCP Executive Director, pastor emeritus, Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio;
- Fr. Kevin Clinton, AUSCP President, pastor, Church of St. Wenceslaus, Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis, Minnesota;
- Donna B. Doucette, VOTF Executive Director;
- Fr. Tom Ogg, AUSCP, pastor emeritus, Diocese of Cheyenne, Worldwide Marriage Encounter—U.S. Ecclesial Priest.

Ask your bishop to support an ordained women's diaconate

In August 2016, Pope Francis established the Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate to review the theology and history of the office of deacon in the Roman Catholic Church and the question of whether women might be allowed to become deacons. The commission comprised 12 experts in patristic theology, ecclesiology, and spirituality and was led by Archbishop Luis Ladaria, S.J., Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prefect.

On May 7 of this year, Pope Francis declared that his study commission on an ordained women's diaconate had failed to reach a consensus on whether women were ordained deacons in the early church in the same way as men.

Voice of the Faithful joins other Catholics in advocating for women to be ordained deacons no matter what historical hairs the commission and the Pope may split. This is a matter of justice. A just Church treats everyone equally. We will continue to advocate for women to be ordained deacons and ask that U.S. bishops urge Pope Francis to restore the ordained women's diaconate.

In that vein, please see the template letter below that you can use to write to your bishop on this issue.

Template Letter Requesting Bishops to Act

Dear Bishop _____,

I urge you, quickly, to counsel Pope Francis to restore an ordained women's diaconate. I was deeply disappointed that the Pope's study commission on the women's diaconate, after two year's work, had not reached a consensus on whether women in the early Church had been ordained deacons similarly to men.

The Pope, however, has indicated that he would welcome further discussion. Phyllis Zagano, a theologian and one of the 12 people on the commission, has said she sees the Pope's comments as an invitation to continue publishing her own research and as a chal-

lenge to you and your brother bishops to talk about this issue.

Personally, I feel that no matter what historical certainty on ordained women deacons the commission and the Pope may seek, this is a matter of justice. A just Church treats everyone equally, according to their particular charisms and callings. Rather than rely on what women deacons did historically or how

their authority was conferred, the Church needs to assess what an ordained women's diaconate could do today.

If the focus is on what was done in the "early" Church, the evidence of women ministering in the first-century Church is overwhelming. The Church cannot afford today to continue to be wedded to traditions that limit the people of God.

Bishop _____, I appeal to your sense of justice, as well as to your common sense. Please do what is morally correct and urge Pope Francis to restore the ordained women's diaconate in the Church.

You can find your bishop's name and address on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website at usccb.org.



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Keep the Faith, Change the Church

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Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide organization of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. We support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and work to help shape structural change in the Church.

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