

Voice of the Faithful 2021 Conference in late October promises virtual renewal

Especially concerned for the health of our attendees in the current COVID-19 pandemic environment, Voice of the Faithful will conduct its 2021 Conference virtually again this year. Our theme will be *Re-Membering the Church: Moving Forward*. We'll meet on Zoom on Friday, Oct. 22, for Listening Sessions and on Saturday, Oct. 23, for the full-day conference.

We're greatly anticipating hearing our featured speakers' approaches to our theme of *Re-Membering the Church*. Will re-membering truly be how we could move forward?



Sister Carol Zinn, S.S.J., Ph.D.

Francine Cardman, Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Boston College and member of VOTF's Advisory Council, told attendees during VOTF's 2005 Conference that re-membering is about bodies and members ... larger organism and organization. She said, "Re-membering in this sense is about mending the members, mending relationships, and keeping the body living, connected, and whole."



*Prof. Massimo Faggioli, Ph.D.,
Historical Theology, Villanova U.*

What could the Church be if we looked closely at the body of the Church to see how structure, power, participation, and accountability could be brought together within the Church to fulfill its mission of bringing Christ to the world? We'll take a look at this question during our

2021 Conference. Here is the agenda:

Voice of the Faithful 2021 Conference

Re-Membering the Church: Moving Forward

Friday, Oct. 22, 2021

7:00 P.M. Listening Sessions

Saturday, Oct. 23, 2021

8:30 A.M. Gather in Zoom Waiting Room

9:00 A.M. Welcome, Mary Pat Fox, VOTF President & Moderator

9:15 A.M. Opening Prayer/Song, Claire Byrne, Paulist Center Boston

9:20 A.M. **Sister Carol Zinn, S.S.J., Ph.D.**, Leadership Conference of Women Religious Executive Director

10:15 A.M. Sister Carol Zinn Q&A

10:45 A.M. Break

11:00 A.M. **Massimo Faggioli, Ph.D.**, Professor of Theology, Villanova U.

11:55 A.M. Massimo Faggioli Q&A

12:25 P.M. Lunch

1:10 P.M. Child Protection Working Group Presentation, VOTF Trustee Patricia Gomez

1:35 P.M. Child Protection Working Group Q&A

1:50 P.M. Finance Working Group Presentation (Transparency & Governance), VOTF Trustee Margaret Roylance

2:15 P.M. Finance Working Group Q&A

2:30 P.M. Panel Discussion on Lay-led Liturgies by women liturgy leaders at the Paulist Center Boston faith community

2:55 P.M. Panel Discussion on Lay-led Liturgies Q&A

3:10 P.M. Women's Emerging Voices Presentation, former VOTF Trustee Svea Fraser and Diane Hogan, WEV Working Group

3:35 P.M. Women's Emerging Voices Q&A

3:50 P.M. Closing Remarks, Mary Pat Fox, VOTF President & Moderator

4:05 P.M. Closing Benediction, Fr. Bill Clark, College of the Holy Cross

In the synodal way, VOTF addresses protection of children and church governance

(Photos © Creative Commons)

This October, Pope Francis at the Vatican, and Church leaders at every diocese throughout the world, will open a three-year synodal process that will culminate in Rome on Oct. 23, 2023. This will be a synod “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

Seeking to continue Church reform in the spirit of Vatican II, Pope Francis has continually tried to involve the whole Church in making decisions about the Church. His three-stage process for the 2023 synod will bring together the whole Church—at the diocesan level, October 2021 through April 2022; continental level, September 2022 through March 2023; and universal Church at the Vatican in October 2023. At each level, the faithful will work through a process of “listening and discernment.”

Voice of the Faithful already has begun modeling such a process, by gathering the faithful in Mini-Synods to hear their voices, listening and discerning on two vital issues: protection of children and Church governance. Thus far, one Mini-Synod on child protection and two on Church governance have taken place in virtual space.

Protection of Children

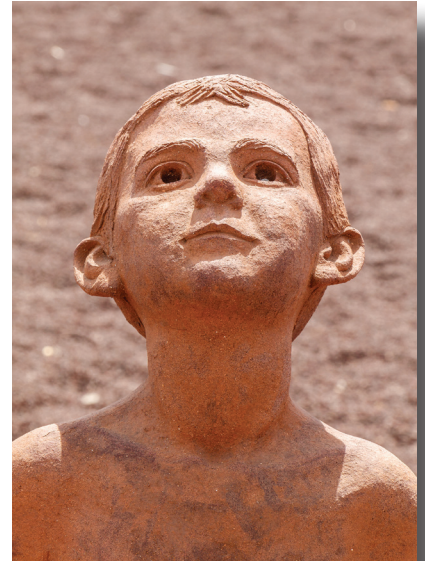


The Protection of Children Mini-Synod asked how the Covid pandemic affected child protection policies and what happens as we emerge from it. Key points raised during the Mini-Synod and its breakout sessions included:

- Are religious education classes taking place remotely?
- How is prevention training for new teachers/adults being conducted?
- Are remote learning teachers getting background checks?
- Do all teachers conducting remote sessions receive child protection training?

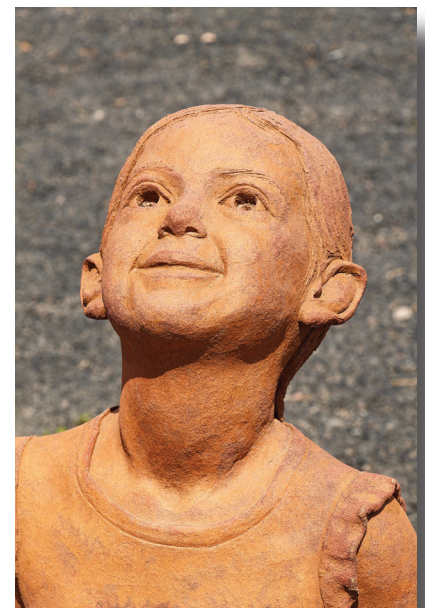
Participants in one breakout session concluded that child safety begins with commitment from the pastor/administrative

team. Also, CORI checks should be done every year, which is not always the case presently. Regarding safety protocols and guidelines, although published on many diocesan websites, some or no information on them appears on parish websites, which should be the primary source. Everyone agreed that, although the clergy abuse scandal broke twenty years ago, we still need to be cautious and aware of what is happening.



At another breakout session, some found adherence to child protection guidelines sketchy, with some classes and trainings taking place virtually, and others saw a complete breakdown of communications, with no religious education classes occurring. One participant pointed out the importance of returning to in-person activities, as social interaction among members of the church community remains so necessary. The question also remains: How are we to increase child safety in parishes; increase parishioners' awareness of the status of safe environment efforts; and educate parishioners on diocesan policies and guidelines, like enforcing codes of conduct for every employee AND volunteer?

In another breakout group, participants compared mechanisms used for the prevention of child abuse. Several were familiar with best practices and explained the importance of CORI checks for religious education teachers and other involved in parish ministries; VIRTUS certificates; the importance of record-keeping; and diligent adherence



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In the synodal way ... (Continued from Page 2)

to the presence of two adults rule. They agreed that the way complaints are heard, investigated, and redressed needs refinement. The group noted that unfamiliarity with child protection measured resulted, at least in part, from the absence of clear expository development on diocesan websites, the lack of direct discussion by parish priests, and lack of encouragement of family involvement in child protection.

Mini-Synod participants overall appreciated and valued the practice of constant vigilance and adherence to programs and systems already in place.

Church Governance—Specifically By and Through Diocesan Finance Councils

Voice of the Faithful has long believed that the clergy sexual abuse scandal would have been ameliorated, or perhaps never happened, had the laity been aware of secret financial settlements that silenced victims. Thus, VOTF has always committed to promoting financial transparency and, since 2017,

Why Mini-Synods?

The Synod of Bishops is at a dynamic point of convergence that calls for mutual listening to the Holy Spirit at every level of the Church's life.

(Address of His Holiness, Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015)

has conducted annual online diocesan financial transparency reviews that score the level of financial transparency of every U.S. diocese.

Deepening this commitment, VOTF embarks this fall on an online review of U.S. dioceses' level of lay involvement in Church governance by and through Diocesan Finance Councils.

VOTF held Governance Mini-Synods earlier this year to gauge the faithful's knowledge and experience of DFCs. Main areas of discussion revolved around two questions.

First, how are members of DFCs selected? Quick review of DFCs nationwide has shown that, even though dioceses may have active lay involvement on their Councils, female members are usually absent. This raised a question among participants concerning how VOTF might work to raise awareness of diversity of lay voices within the DFC. If lay DFC members are all wealthy white

male donors, mutual deference to each other may limit the DFC's ability to advise the bishop.

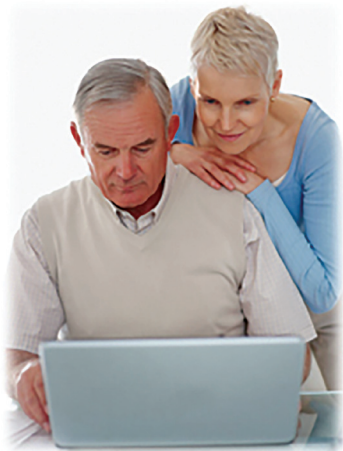
Second, how can bishops be convinced to work more collaboratively with DFCs? Unfortunately, opportunities for such collaboration often arise only when a diocese encounters financial difficulties. As VOTF has noted in its diocesan online financial transparency reviews, increased transparency can occur when a diocese concludes bankruptcy proceedings. The Movement to Restore Trust in the Buffalo Diocese reported they have worked closely and productively with their bishop since the diocese filed for bankruptcy in 2019. Such collaboration has not yet produced results that have appeared on the diocesan website, but transparency may increase as the diocese emerges from bankruptcy.

One of the small-group sessions during the first Governance Mini-Synod had the benefit of having a participant from a diocesan finance office. This participant pointed out that DFC members would have a duty under Canon 1287 to disclose financial malfeasance to the diocesan faithful, but this would be challenging in practice considering the complexity of diocesan finances. Unraveling such finances to show malfeasance could take years, unless regular professional audits of all aspects of a diocese's finances had been conducted.

The Mini-Synod participants stressed that VOTF has an opportunity with its new DFC governance review this fall to educate the faithful by pointing out bright spots and best practices. An additional opportunity for VOTF that came out of the Governance Mini-Synods is the potential for collaboration with the Diocesan Fiscal Management Conference, which could include VOTF's recommendations regarding parish collection counters in its guidelines.

Deepening its commitment to promoting lay voices in Church governance, Voice of the Faithful will embark this fall on an online review of every U.S. dioceses' level of lay involvement in Church governance by and through Diocesan Finance Councils.

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Pope Francis changes Canon Law to strengthen accountability for clergy sexual abuse and cover-up

This past Pentecost, May 23, 2021, Pope Francis changed Book VI of the Church's Code of Canon Law to strengthen accountability for clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up. Among the important changes promulgated by his apostolic constitution, *Pascite gregem Dei*, were (changes take effect Dec. 9, 2021):

- Expanding abusers to include lay people and non-ordained religious;
- Defining predatory grooming behavior as a punishable crime;
- Mandating bishops and superiors MUST punish; not just "may";
- Adding "dignity" to "offences against human life, dignity, and liberty," meaning all humans are worthy of respect; and
- Making NOT reporting abuse a crime.



Independent Catholic News

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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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