

April Is National Child Abuse Prevention Month

Protecting children has always been a VOTF priority

From its beginning, Voice of the Faithful® has ranked protecting children high among its goals. The early days saw formation of a Child Protection Working Group, reviews and dissemination of resource material, meetings with parents and parishes, visits to the Boston Archdiocese, and talks with representatives of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board.



"As we started VOTF affiliates *Will you speak out to protect our children?* in our parishes, a big focus was the safety of children," said Elia Marnik, former VOTF board chair and one of the original Child Protection Working Group members. "We tried to find out what the parishes were doing to protect children and discovered it was very little, so establishing safety committees in every parish became one of our big goals."

Patricia Gomez, presently VOTF's board secretary and also an original member of the Child Protection Working Group, added, "We wanted to provide resources, assistance and ideas at the local level, not only to provide some context for people in the parishes, but also to make them aware of education they were required to take and to establish child safety committees in each parish."

"We really focused our efforts on education at the beginning," said Kathy Mullaney, another of the original Child Protection Working Group members.

"As we learned what was happening," she said, "we wondered why kids were so vulnerable in what we thought

were safe places. The elephant in the room was that children going to church weren't safe, and we asked how we could change that. Our answer was to educate parents, educate lay teachers, educate priests, educate everyone."

"This was more difficult than we imagined," Marnik said. "Through the early years, child safety was an integral part of meetings with Cardinal Sean O'Malley and subsequently Vicar General Richard Erikson (2006-2011). We also met and worked with Deacon Tony Rizzuto, who was the director of the archdiocese's Office of Child Advocacy, Implementation and Oversight. Progress was slower than we had hoped, but we believed that VOTF input made a difference in bringing attention to all aspects of child safety in our parishes."

Marnik cites the Talking About Touching program as an example of how VOTF worked to make a difference. VOTF

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We're "Carrying on" in 2013

"You are, at bottom, doing the work of the Spirit," said Fr. Don Cozzens at VOTF's 10th Year Conference last September. "Please carry on."

Here are a few key projects we'll be "carrying on" this year ...

Financial Accountability & Transparency—Where does our money go? Our team is working with accountants, attorneys and canon lawyers to answer this basic question, and others, such as: Who is on the diocesan Finance Council and how independent are they? Does the diocese publish independent financial audits?

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advocated for parishes to adopt this Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund-sponsored training program, which is geared toward kindergarten through third-grade children.

From the perspective of Church programs, "Once we reviewed the bishop's Dallas Charter," Mullaney said, "we realized it was just window dressing."

"The charter mandated guidelines, but did not specify how the guidelines were to be met," Gomez added, "and there were no provisions for enforcement. When we asked in parishes who is collecting the documents the charter required, we were met with, 'It's not my job. We already have too much to do.' We all agreed USCCB's charter and NRB self-audits were not going to work."

The Child Protection Working Group continued to survey parishes regarding the state of child safety activities and remained focused on local education and parish child safety committees. The group also developed and gathered resources made available on VOTF's website.

Within less than two years, VOTF's National Representative Council had developed the following resolution:

VOTF and its members will work for the formation of Parish Safety Committees (PSCs) in every parish. PSCs will actively support the formation and activities of Child Abuse Prevention (CAP) teams in every parish. CAP activities should include:

1. Prevention education conducted annually for all children, parents and others;
2. Performance of yearly criminal offender record checks on all parish clergy, staff and volunteers;
3. PSCs will ensure zero tolerance for sexual abuse is maintained by obtaining information concerning past assignments of all newly assigned pastoral personnel.

"This isn't a problem that's gone away," Marnik concluded. "It's still very much here."

"We must remain constantly alert," remarked Marnik, "to be sure child protection activities are being followed and Dallas Charter guidelines are being met. You have to wonder today how well people are paying attention to this, whether it's a priority for pastors with increasing responsibilities."

"I don't think the Church is going to help us with this," suggested Mullaney, "so we have to continue educating families and community groups and being vigilant, not only in churches, but everywhere, even in our own families. And we must seize every moment to be vocal, to be visible and to urge the removal of those responsible."

A visible event like April's National Child Abuse Prevention Month, according to Gomez, is a great opportunity for raising awareness, and educating and empowering people.

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Lamentations Wall

Featuring child protection for this issue of *Voice Matters* brings to mind the clergy sexual abuse revelations of 2002. Since then, Catholics have been engulfed in ongoing disclosures about the horrid sexual abuse of children by clergy. The range of emotional responses have included revulsion, confusion, fear, anger and distress. Victims/survivors and their families have been faced with revisiting deep wounds and traumatic memories. Evidence of the abuse mounted coast to coast and then country to country, continent to continent and year after year.


Hierarchical responses to the revelations reflected more of a corporate defense pattern than a model of Gospel teaching. And little was done to address healing and reform.

At the Voice of the Faithful® 10th Year Conference in 2012, we introduced a **Lamentation Wall** where attendees could post personal lamentations in response to the irrevocable

harm, unhealed wounds and resistance by hierarchy to Church reform that evolved from the sexual abuse crisis.

Lamentations are a traditional response in both Christian and Hebrew Scriptures, evoked by the prophets who call the community to "prayers of lamentation" in the face of immeasurable suffering and loss.

At the Conference, lamentations poured from people's hearts, expressing sorrow over the lives permanently scarred or taken as a result of childhood sexual abuse. And they wrote of personal wounds from revelations of abuse and malfeasance, as well as wounds resulting from the culture of clericalism that enables such deep harm to continue.

We are continuing the **Lamentation Wall** on our website at www.votf.org. Click Child Protection and Survivor Support on the home page and then click the Forum bullet. When the **Lamentation Wall** page appears, you may post your own personal lament. 

Child Abuse Prevention Month: *Who Will Speak for the Children?*

The U.S. federal government has designated April as National Child Abuse Prevention Month. We ask Voice of the Faithful® members to mark the month by speaking out and speaking up.

We have learned, in this decade of appalling revelations, how silence fosters abuse, even in those corners where we once assumed children would be safe—silence from the Church hierarchy; silence from lay people who did not report suspicions; silence in schools, and Scout troops, and sports teams; silence among law-enforcement officials in decades past when institutions were left alone to deal with abusers—and failed to do so effectively.

We now know that child protection cannot be left to “others.” ***Who will speak for the children if not you?*** Unless we raise our voices, nothing will change in our families, our churches or our neighborhoods. Won’t you speak out today about the reality of child abuse?

VOTF calls on all members and supporters to speak out for children. Here are several ways in which you can speak out:

- Promote reform of child sexual abuse statutes of limitation in your state. Experts say extending time limits during which criminal charges and civil suits might be brought, or eliminating those statutes, may be the best way to protect children from sex abusers. Charges against perpetrators and against those who cover up their crimes bring secrets into the open, end the silence that protects abusers and encourage child protection program administrators to redouble their efforts to protect children.

Also check your state’s mandatory reporting laws. Call your state legislators and express your opinions about protecting children. Contact your local child protection and abuse prevention agency to learn more about advocating for child victims in your community.

- Spend time with your children or grandchildren. Talk to them about personal and Internet safety and ask them about their concerns. Teach them to trust their instincts if an interaction doesn’t feel right and encourage them to tell someone.
- Stay current on the issue. Ask for and read thoroughly your diocese’s child protection policies and guidelines




Who will speak out to protect our children?

for adult volunteers and employees. Take or retake a class on preventing child abuse. Check with your schools, faith communities or youth-serving organizations about how they ensure compliance with policy. Make sure you know your local child protection hotline for reporting concerns, and keep it handy.

- In 1989, the federal government designated a blue ribbon to symbolize those harmed by abuse. Wear a blue ribbon to remind yourself and others to take action throughout April, and beyond.
- Take the time to remember those injured by physical, emotional or sexual violence in your thoughts and prayers. Share your concerns for children with your faith community; request that communal prayers and petitions for protection and healing be included in liturgies.
- Talk about prevention with at least one other adult. Bring up the topic with your friends at church, in school or around the neighborhood.

Local plans for observing National Child Abuse Prevention Month were not solidified when *Voice Matters* went to press, but watch for news about activities in your area from your local VOTF affiliate or parish child safety committee. Also, visit **www.childwelfare.gov** for even more ways to help protect children and to obtain materials for activities.

You cannot begin to stop the abuse until you are willing to speak openly about it. **Will you speak?** The victimized children in your community are waiting for your answer.

This piece was edited from a VOTF member email by Kathy Weyer, which she wrote on behalf of the Child Support and Survivor Protection Team. 

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Roles for Women in the Church—When will our Church open the door to women deacons? Pious assurances aside, we all know women remain “behind the curtain” in the Church, not validated in their own pastoral charisms. Restoring the female diaconate is a start, and that’s where we’ll focus our attention: educating Catholics about a tradition lost and sorely needed in the Church today.

Ordination of Married Catholics—Why won’t the Church ordain married Catholic men? Pastoral provisions allow ordination of married ministers who convert from other faith traditions. Why shouldn’t we offer the same option to Catholic men? Returning to the ordination of married men is especially critical when vocations to the celibate priesthood are declining and our parishes are closing.

Bishop Selection—Why can’t we have a greater say in the appointment of our local bishop? Greater lay input into such selections remains a critical project for us. VOTF members have already wrapped up two projects—in Manchester, New Hampshire, and in Chicago, where more than 600 Catholics offered their ideas through our website portal and on a diocese-wide survey. Soon we will open the web portal to other dioceses where bishops are nearing retirement age.

Survivor Support & Child Protection—We support survivors who wish to tell their stories, and those whose calls for truth and justice are even today under assault by some bishops who are determined not to answer. We look for ways to strengthen U.S. child protection guidelines, which too many bishops

and pastors—and sadly, too many lay people—no longer apply with vigilance.

Support for U.S. Nuns—Why does the Vatican “investigate” nuns who are on the front lines of ministering to the poorest and the neediest among us when the bishops who hid pedophiles remain unexamined? VOTF continues to support the work and the collegial approach of women religious, which stand as stark counterpoints to the political aspirations of most bishops. The integrity of the nuns in responding to bishops stands as a model for us all.

“You are, at bottom, doing the work of the Spirit. Please carry on.”

Fr. Don Cozzens

Support for Priests—We reach out to priests, who bear the brunt of down-sized ministries, whose pensions are often one bishop-frown (or one embezzling custodian) away from lost, who find their time spent re-learning Latinized language and awkward rituals rather than meeting the needs of their parishioners.

Call for Church Reforms—We support Church reforms like those mentioned above in order to foster the healing so essential in our Church, to strip away a clerical culture that enabled crimes of sex abuse and the cover-ups that hid them.

We seek reform in a “time of unease and instability and confusion,” to quote another of our Conference speakers, Prof. Joseph O’Callaghan, “yet the seeds of reform are there. So, never give up.”

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Bequests provide financial and/or tax benefits; guarantee VOTF’s long-term financial security; cost nothing to set up; offer great satisfaction by helping to sustain VOTF; can be a specific dollar amount, or property, or a percentage of your estate; and are simple and flexible. For information, contact VOTF’s office at office@votf.org or 781-559-3360.

Thank you, and God bless you for your generosity.



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Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide movement 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. Our three goals are to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse; support conscientious priests; and shape structural change in the Church.

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