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January 28, 2020

Mr. Tom Roberts, Editor  
*National Catholic Reporter*  
115 E. Armour Blvd.  
Kansas City MO 64111

Dear Mr. Roberts,

As a long-time member of Voice of the Faithful, I read with interest Michael Sean Winters' December 9, 2019, article entitled *The Dangers of Undoing the Evolved Strength of the Papacy*. VOTF has been working since 2002 to advance meaningful and active engagement of the laity in the life of the Church, and I do not share Mr. Winters' concern over greater lay involvement. I believe that active involvement by the laity in the church, starting in local faith communities, is the only way to bring about change in the Church—changes Mr. Winters and many others see as essential.

We encourage lay Catholics to exercise their Baptismal rights and responsibilities and to use their God-given gifts for the good of the Church. This is not synonymous, despite Mr. Winters' fears, with encouraging rich Catholic lay people, whatever their preferred governance style, to buy a Church that caters to their tastes.

The changes proposed by VOTF have always included all the faithful—and by that we mean not the laity alone, not the religious alone, not the clergy and the hierarchy alone, but ALL the faithful, together. I urge Mr. Winters and other readers to review the many such proposals posted over the years on our web site.

I also wish to respond to this challenge posed by Mr. Winters: "Those who prattle on about the problems with 'bishops investigating bishops' should get serious and explain what alternative they think is better."

Actually, VOTF has proposed several reasonable modifications to existing policies and procedures in the course of the last two decades. Two such alternatives, Independent Judicial Review and Mutual Visitation, are described in the next pages.

### *Independent Judicial Review*

Currently, a diocesan bishop possesses ALL executive, legislative, and judicial authority within the diocese, as described in Canon 391:

**Can. 391 §1** The diocesan Bishop governs the particular Church entrusted to him with legislative, executive and judicial power, in accordance with the law.

**§2** The Bishop exercises legislative power himself. He exercises executive power either personally or through Vicars general or episcopal Vicars, in accordance with the law. He exercises judicial power either personally or through a judicial Vicar and judges, in accordance with the law.

The canon does not provide redress for unjust decisions or actions of the diocesan bishop except through appeal to the Holy See, and that appeal must be conveyed through the bishop himself—an untenable option for most who suffer from injustice.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law, reflecting understandings that emerged from the Second Vatican Council, did at least acknowledge the existence of **The People of God** and, for the first time in Christian history, provide a “Bill of Rights” for members of the Church. Unfortunately, despite this definition, there was no companion definition for the redress available if these rights are violated.

Originally, as drafted and approved by the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law, the new Code had authorized Episcopal Conferences to establish in their territory “administrative tribunals” to deal with grievances when rights were violated. But these canons were deleted before the 1983 Code was promulgated. Despite this oversight, the 1983 Code did not specifically prohibit the establishment of such tribunals.

Thus, VOTF proposed in 2005 that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops **establish administrative tribunals within the Episcopal Conference**, allowing the laity within a diocese a means of timely redress when actions of their diocesan bishop violate their rights under Canon Law.

In other words, we have not “prattled on” about the unchecked power of bishops but instead have suggested at least one alternative that can operate *within* the current hierarchical structure—while we await more-meaningful changes that acknowledge the authority of the community of the faithful instead of the whims of a single “ruler.”

### *Mutual Visitations*

Also in 2005, VOTF proposed that a process of **mutual visitation among dioceses** be established as a mechanism for encouraging renewal and strengthening fraternal correction where it is needed. Again, we did not stand on the sidelines pointing out flaws, but instead proposed reasonable alternatives that can apply even under the current structure.

The visitations we suggest would be similar to a process already used within some dioceses, and it is analogous to the accreditation process in universities and hospitals. In the latter organizations, an accreditation visit triggers a valuable process of self-examination in those preparing for it, and it could have the same beneficial effects within a diocese preparing for a mutual visitation.

In the case of mutual visitation, an independent Visitation Committee, established by an appropriately constituted committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, could be established. The Visitation Committee could include both clerical and lay members, acting in the essential spirit of collaboration.

In a visitation process, a group formed from peer communities comes into an organization and visits and consults with elements of the organization. For a diocesan visitation, consultation would be with laity, clergy, religious orders, etc. The Visitation Committee would then prepare a visitation report. Where the committee identifies remarkable weaknesses, its report could include an action plan. Needed changes could be undertaken before conditions became grave enough to merit a Papal intervention.

Although neither of these proposals—*independent judicial review and mutual visitation*—encompass all the reforms needed for today's inadequate and insulated administrative structures in the Church, they have the advantage of inserting corrective voices using the existing hierarchical constructs.

In addition, Voice of the Faithful has proposed several other steps that can involve all the faithful—clergy and laity—in the reforms needed to correct the disabling dysfunctions we see today. It's pointless to substitute a moneyed upper class for an encrusted hierarchy, or to submit questions of faith, morals, and parish structure to a political vote, which is why we seek changes that involve all the laity and clergy working together.

We look for new understandings and new ways of enfolding all within the collaborative administration of our Church. We would be happy to continue that discussion with Mr. Winters and with any others who are open to considering new ideas that embrace best practices of the "old ways" while improving (and hopefully healing) what now lies broken within our Church.

Keep the faith, change the Church,



Margaret Roylance, Ph.D.  
Vice President, Voice of the Faithful  
Chair, Finance Working Group

cc: Mr. Michael Sean Winters