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## The Lay Vocation and Voice of the Faithful

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CNS PHOTO FROM REUTERS

Catholic members of Voice of the Faithful tally votes during a meeting at Our Lady Help of Christians Church in Newton, Mass., on Dec. 11, 2002. The group had elected to send a letter to the Vatican asking for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston.

# The Lay Vocation and Voice of the Faithful

— BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH —

ONE UNANTICIPATED EFFECT of the sexual abuse scandal that has been convulsing the Catholic Church in the United States is a growing realization on the part of the laity of how little real say they have in the government of their church. This was first brought home when many who were aware of situations of abuse went to the authorities and later found that nothing had been done. But as Catholics began talking to one another about their frustration, they began to realize that while this was the most serious case of not being heard, it was not the only one.

What is becoming more evident to many lay men and women is that there are no

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institutional checks and balances that allow them some say about how authority is exercised in the church, whether at the parish, diocesan or universal level. They have no way to address the problem of an incompetent pastor or an authoritarian bishop, no say over their appointment, no way to bring their own concerns and experience to the decision-making processes of the universal church. There are no structures of accountability. Without them, many feel that the church is treating them as children. And they are more and more coming to see the present crisis as calling the laity to adult status in the church. This was clearly the intention of the Second Vatican Council in its concern to articulate a theology of the laity.

Though the council rediscovered the dignity of the vocation of the baptized, the church is still struggling to find ways to fully express the laity's share in the mission of the church. The scandal of sexual abuse by clergy has made clear once again how little input they actually have in the church's decision-making process. The idea of the autonomous, monarchical bishop, accountable only to Rome, has more to do with developments in the late Middle Ages than with anything intrinsic to the office. Donald Cozzens' expression, a "still feudal church," is too often accurate. Finding effective ways to give laity and clergy some participation in the church's decision-making processes is clearly one of the crucial issues the church faces today.

There are a number of things that could be easily done without overturning the church's papal/episcopal structure. The laity should be involved on all levels of local church government. Beyond a narrow circle of clerical diocesan consultors, bishops should have a council that functions on an analogy with a board of trustees, reviewing and giving input on significant policy decisions. Note that I say on an analogy with, for the very word "trustees" will raise the specter of "lay trusteeism," which lay behind the controversy over "Americanism" in the late 19th century. There is nothing in principle that would exclude some kind of lay participation in councils and synods today. There are precedents in the high Middle Ages for church representatives

other than bishops taking part in ecumenical councils; and some consultations with representatives of the laity took place at Vatican II, with lay auditors taking official seats on two conciliar commissions.

### An Initiative of the Faithful

At the center of the current crisis, a new initiative for greater lay involvement has emerged, Voice of the Faithful, a lay organization that has rapidly spread throughout the United States and now comprises some 30,000 members and 188 parish affiliates in 40 states and 21 countries. According to its Web site, V.O.T.F. is a group of Catholics who describe themselves as loving and supporting the Roman Catholic Church, accepting its teaching authority, including the role

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of the bishops and the pre-eminent role of the pope as the primary teachers and leaders of the church, and believing what the Catholic Church believes. V.O.T.F.'s mission is "to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church," while its stated goals include: (1) to support those who have been abused, (2) to support priests of integrity and (3) to shape structural change within the church. Since July 2002, the "Structural Change Working Group" has been seeking ways to renew church structures in light of Vatican II, with a canon lawyer, Ladislav Orsy, S.J., as an outside consultant.

The appearance of V.O.T.F. has not exactly been welcomed by the hierarchy. At last year's meeting of the U.S. Catholic bishops, only 10 bishops were willing to meet with the group. Eight bishops, all but one on the East Coast, ordered their pastors to refuse V.O.T.F. permission to use church facilities for their meetings, though in late April, Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn reversed himself, acknowledging after a dialogue with V.O.T.F. leaders that many of those involved were "good and dedicated members of our diocese." In April of this year, Chicago's Cardinal

**L**aypeople must be willing to take a longer view of how decisions are ultimately made in the church's life, to embrace a gradualist approach.

Francis George, one of the 10, expressed some cautions about the movement; but he also pointed out that the V.O.T.F. agenda is still in formation and so should not be dismissed as an expression of dissent. By June, V.O.T.F. had met with more than 25 bishops across the country and has at least spoken with four cardinals.

My own experience of V.O.T.F. came several months ago when I was asked to address a nascent V.O.T.F. group in southern California on Vatican II's theology of the laity. I was impressed. The 60 or so people gathered were not "movement" types; they were ordinary Catholics, deeply involved in the life of the church and concerned for its future. What they lacked was the church language to formulate their concerns adequately.

Particularly lacking is a realistic vision of how V.O.T.F. might work with bishops and local churches, given the nervousness of hierarchy and pastors. There are at least three models of how V.O.T.F. might contribute in the practical

order to the renewal of church structures. One sees V.O.T.F. as a structure parallel to that of the diocese, a second understands it as an advocacy or pressure group, and a third seeks to incorporate V.O.T.F. members at all levels of the life of the local church. Let us briefly consider each.

### **Parallel Structures**

V.O.T.F.'s call for dialogue with the bishop on local levels suggests a model of parallel structures. The idea seems to be that in each diocese bishops would enter into dialogue with an organized V.O.T.F. group. For example, V.O.T.F. Long Island issued a letter on April 28, 2003, to Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., objecting that he would not acknowledge having met with their organization, rather than simply with several of their leaders as individuals. In other words, V.O.T.F. Long Island wants the bishop to meet with them as an organization, giving them quasi-official recognition.

### **Advocacy Group**

Another model would have V.O.T.F. function in local dioceses along the lines of an advocacy group, rather like a political action committee. In this way, V.O.T.F. groups functioning alongside official diocesan structures could sponsor lectures, seminars and public meetings for interested Catholics and serve literally as an alternative "voice" for the local church, publicizing issues of concern, issuing statements to the press and organizing in order to bring pressure to bear. For example, on April 6 New Hampshire's Voice of the Faithful called on Bishop John B. McCormack and Auxiliary Bishop Francis J. Christian to resign their positions as bishops of the Diocese of Manchester, N.H. This was done only after a period of examining

the record of both bishops, finding "a general disregard to the testimony of sexual abuse victims and an unwillingness to remove predatory priests from contact with children." While this model would on occasion function as a pressure group, it has the advantage of not needing official recognition. It could also play an important educational role.

### **Incorporational Model**

A third model would encourage V.O.T.F. members to become actively involved at every level of the local church—as indeed many of them already are. If they were to make themselves available as members of parish councils and diocesan offices, serve on diocesan committees and advisory boards or as delegates to diocesan synods and pastoral councils, they would have a hand in shaping policy from within. And this would be done much more effectively if they continued to meet together and strategize in their V.O.T.F. group.



## Evaluation

Many will see the first "parallel structures" model as unrealistic. Since it would not necessarily represent all of the faithful of a given local church, given that not all are V.O.T.F. members or support its methods, it is unlikely that most bishops would be ready to enter into dialogue with such a group.

The second model has considerable merit in that Catholics have a right to organize themselves in order to grow in their faith and exercise their responsibilities as adult members of the church. Some will object to their at times confrontational approach, but the laity have a right to have their concerns taken seriously by the hierarchy. According to the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church": "An individual layman [or laywoman], by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the Church for this purpose" (No. 37). This of course is the ideal, but where "agencies" or channels are not available, a more direct, even confrontational approach may be the only alternative.

While the various V.O.T.F. groups may choose one or more approaches as best suited to their particular situations, the most effective in the long term may well be the third. It is also the way the church should work, and often is working. As we all know, no local church or parish could survive without the active involvement of the laity. Many dioceses already have lay heads of diocesan departments or secretariats.

But to be an effective presence, lay men and women must be willing to take the risk of disagreeing with policies and decisions that do not seem to reflect the good of the community. They must speak the truth with love, even if this proves unpopular. Just as the bishops often do not speak out, "lest they embarrass the Holy Father," so also lay men and women are reluctant to say something that might embarrass their pastor or bishop. They must also be willing to take a longer view of how decisions are ultimately made in the church's life, to embrace a gradualist approach. Structural change takes time; it does not happen in a moment.

But if change is the church's "dirty little secret," as Garry Wills once suggested, in the long run it is unavoidable. Thus we have to hang in, continue to do our best to educate ourselves and one another, speaking out when necessary. We need to listen to and learn from one another, allowing the Spirit to transform both the church and ourselves from within. Voice of the Faithful can play an important role in this process. It might just make a difference. **A**

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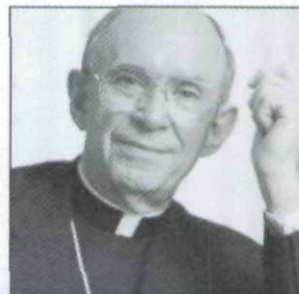
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