

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL: 2002 AND 2009

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I haven't commented much on statements issued by VOTF people in the past several months. I realize that my thoughts and opinions on the institutional church are far different from those of many in VOTF, especially people in leadership. I respect and acknowledge this. In the past I have been blunt and critical of plans to dialogue with bishops. I have done so not out of rancor or disrespect for those hoping for meaningful conversation, but from a basis of 24 years of hard experience. I surely do not expect people to have reached the same conclusions I have reached from my years of involvement because none have had similar experiences. My hope was that by sharing these experiences I would at least help some avoid the disappointment and disillusionment I have gone through.

Recently however I have seen some things that have prompted me to speak out. The first is the mention of support by the Downtown Brooklyn Chapter of VOTF for the New York bishops' opposition to the Markey Bill. This statement was contained in Bishop DiMarzio's 30 page report, *From Shadow to Light* issued in May 2009. The purpose of this report was to garner support for the opposition to the bill. The report contains misleading and erroneous information. When the favorable mention of the Downtown Brooklyn Chapter was seen it resulted in a great deal of anger and disappointment by many sex abuse survivors as well as others who support the victims.

The Downtown Brooklyn Chapter of VOTF does not support the national stance that the rollback of the statute of limitations is a good thing. These chapters, rather, understand that the pending legislation could be very detrimental to the Church and its work....It seems that the group gives the Diocese of Brooklyn high marks on Church management; however, they are still concerned about the other issues which they would like to be explained to their satisfaction. (page 26)

This statement is incredible in light of the outrageous conduct of Bishop DiMarzio during the Church's campaign to defeat the proposed legislation, conduct that included threatening State legislators with closing parishes in their districts!

Subsequent to the publication of the report I saw a statement in an email to the effect that the report misstated the Downtown Brooklyn chapter's position. Yet there was no public retraction by the chapter nor was there ever any adequate and believable explanation as to how this statement even got into the report. Many of us felt betrayed!

The second issue I wish to refer to is the section entitled "Possible Impact of Pending Legislation" at the conclusion of Dick Grafer's report on finances in the diocese of Rockville Center. The document I refer to is entitled "*How Much Is Enough?*" The

author believes that passage of the Markey Bill or something similar would have a negative impact on the diocese and force a cutback in services. He stated that this happened on the west coast “*where a number of States passed such legislation.*”

In the first place, the only west coast state to pass such legislation has been California. All are aware that the total of the settlements in California came to well over a billion dollars. All are not aware that the Church’s attorneys, who are paid by the hour, accumulated fees in the range of 200 million dollars. This has been especially true in Los Angeles where Cardinal Mahony’s lawyers have opposed every case at every step of the way and are now opposing the court ordered disclosure of priest personnel files.

Delaware passed similar legislation with great support from the Delaware VOTF chapter, and close to 200 cases have been reported. In spite of the predictions of doom by the Church, no financial disasters or ministerial cutbacks have resulted.

The payments to victims did not result in any cutbacks in any diocese in California. In fact, payments of well deserved settlements to victims have not threatened Church services anywhere. In several dioceses the bishops tried to attribute already planned parish or school closings on victims’ awards and in every instance this was seen to be blatantly false. It is also worth noting that in 2004 the archdiocese of Los Angeles opened a new cathedral the cost of which was announced at about \$124 million dollars but which, according to some reports, climbed as high as \$200 million. In December of 2004 the Diocese of Orange in California settled with 90 victims for slightly over one hundred million dollars (\$100,000,000.00). Half was paid by insurance and half by the diocese by means of a loan which was totally repaid within two years. The same year the diocese began building a Cathedral that would eventually cost in excess of \$100 million. Next to the cathedral is the \$1.2 million dollar house for the priests.

Then in 2007 the Diocese of Oakland began construction of its own new Cathedral originally estimated at \$131 million. Upon completion this estimate ballooned to a final cost of \$190 million.

In light of these architectural excesses it appears quite ridiculous for any bishop in California to claim that awarding money to the people whose lives and souls the Church has destroyed will cause any impact on Church activities.

Mr. Grafer’s statement reflects only one perspective, that of an accountant. It reflects an understanding of “Church” that is sorely limited to what we all see way too much, Church as *corporation* and Church as *business*. The Diocese of Rockville Center has treated victims with consistent disdain and often with brutality. The bishop has acted not like a monarch...that wouldn’t be half bad, but like a narcissistic tyrant.

The bishops of New York launched an all-out war against the supporters of the Markey bill. They spent thousands to employ lobbyists. They regularly resorted to scare tactics founded on lies. In effect, they proved without question, once again, that the bishops in this country are obsessed with their money, their buildings and their power and

care naught for the persons whom the clergy have ruined. Their opposition was based on gross selfishness. They did not bother with the concerns of others who have been trying to promote justice and compassion for *all* childhood victims of abuse. In short, the Catholic bishops shot down a chance at protection for all victims and not just Catholics. Mr. Grafer seemed totally oblivious to the scope and devastating impact of clergy sexual abuse and to the refusal of the hierarchy to accept any responsibility for this abuse. His statement also enraged, disappointed and betrayed victims and those who support the victim.

Finally Mr. Grafer advocates a compromise approach. That might be possible on another planet but the intense experience of countless victims, their attorneys and their supporters have proven without doubt that no compromise with the bishops is possible. Survivor support groups have offered compromises but like all things the bishops get involved with it has to be their way or no way. The only way to get anything that remotely resembles accountability out of them is through the civil courts and the only pain they feel is when that which they treasure most is threatened: their money and their power.

Next I wish to cite a brief response to the Vatican investigation of nuns that has been circulating. The author is Ann Brennan from the Chicago area.

The Vatican has launched an aggressive campaign to bring American nuns into submission to its pre-Vatican II ideas of orthodoxy. This is definitely not the time to launch another campaign to bring them into submission to the SNAP agenda, legitimate though it may be. Not only is the survival of the LCWR at stake, but also the visionary and courageous sisters who elected them and the entire Vatican II inspired progressive movement within the American Catholic Church. We need instead to be campaigning in support of their leadership and ministry, and if anything, calling for a Vatican examination of the Vatican II orthodoxy and lifestyle orthopraxy of American priests and bishops. Anne Brennan, VOTF Chicagoland Northeast.

This sentiment is not only offensive and insulting to victims but it implies that the SNAP “agenda” is akin to other political or theological agendas both in and outside the Church. The SNAP “agenda” is what the radical Christian mandate is all about -- reaching out to and helping the most rejected. The institutional Church has victimized its most vulnerable and refuses to accord them the justice and compassion that it asks its members to extend to the causes that it selects...causes that do not threaten the ecclesiastical establishment.

The LCWR is hypocritical. The hundreds and perhaps thousands of victims of sexual and physical abuse by religious women in this country alone remain a second elephant in the Church’s ornate living room. Abuse of the vulnerable is not just another excess such as buying autos that are too elegant or having fine wine at meals. The physical and sexual abuse of these people is a harsh reality and not an exaggeration or a myth. If VOTF and Ann Brennan are aware of this their attitude toward justice for victims is deeply flawed and if they are not aware they should become aware. The “*visionary and courageous*” sisters need to clean up their own act before they take on

anything else. Ann and the others in VOTF need to know how the victims have been treated by the LCWR leadership.....with arrogance and disdain. These same sisters who now are justifiably complaining about the imperialistic Vatican cabal have acted with just as much arrogance and clericalism as the bishops whom they criticize.

VOTF has announced its next national gathering to take place on October 29, 2009. The event will feature Sr. Joan Chittister and Fr. Tom Reese, both strong and prophetic advocates for the return of the institutional Church to Christianity. Looking back over the past twenty years I have watched as most of the “prophetic” voices in the Church have either avoided standing publicly with the victims of abuse or, if they have spoken out, have done so with much timidity and with such nuance that their support is inconsequential. Will the survivors of the Church’s vicious abuse be sidelined or completely ignored? Does VOTF need to be reminded once again that it was the shock from discovering the Church’s culture of sexual abuse that inspired a small group in Boston to reclaim their voices? Are the convention planners, the board of directors and/or the national leadership afraid to give voice to survivors lest their sensitivities be threatened or their hopes of dialogue with bishops be dashed?

I speak not from exaggerated notions of what is and what has been. I have been in the front lines and at the core of the “scandal.” I have seen first-hand the absolute duplicity of the hierarchical leaders of this country. They issue statement after eloquent statement, usually prepared by P.R. specialists, about their concern for victims, their successes in dealing with abusive clerics, their awareness of the problem. This blanket of fluff unsuccessfully camouflages a harsh reality quite opposite to that which they portray. While they are preaching concern for the victims and apologies for “*mistakes that might have happened in the past*” they continue to oppose any legislation that will help all children, mostly by a barrage of lies and scare tactics. They continue to waste millions of the dollars donated by the remaining “faithful” on their attorneys who fight long and brutal battles with victims in court, often using any manner of disgusting and unethical tactics to discredit and demoralize them.

My critical remarks must, in a spirit of justice and honesty, be put into a context of the affirmative actions of many individual VOTF members and of many local affiliates around the country. In my travels from one coast to the other I have been hosted by a number of local chapters with courageously committed members who have traveled the painful road from Catholic infancy to Catholic adulthood and in the process developed a strong commitment to justice and compassion for those harmed by the Church. I have seen local affiliates whose support of legislative change has been visible and relentless. I recall well the constant presence of the Delaware VOTF membership during the long, hard process to change the legislation at the State Capitol in Dover. I know of many VOTF members who are always present at the demonstrations and picket lines, supporting the victims in their painful quest for recognition by the uncaring and insensitive bishops.

The credibility of VOTF or any other organization that seeks to reform the institutional Church hinges on whether or not it understands the profound significance of

the scandal of sexual abuse of vulnerable persons by clerics and religious. For me this understanding is framed in a question:

How can I believe? How can I believe in a church as an earthly realm of God if the Church's leaders at once claim a divine commission yet knowingly allow their own clerics and religious to devastate the most vulnerable members in the most disgusting and depraved manner imaginable? How can I believe in this Church if those who claim to be essential to its existence sacrifice those whose souls they have plundered for the sake of their own security? How can I believe in a Church when its leaders continue to act as if the center of it is themselves and not the Christ? How can I believe?

Those who have suffered sexual abuse and betrayal by clergy or religious order members almost always suffer intense pain from spiritual loss. This pain is shared by many others who have supported them, fought for them, agonized with them....their parents, children, siblings....their attorneys, counselors and their friends. How much of this suffering has been aggravated by the false belief instilled in us that faith in God equaled faith in the Church and rejection of the Church or Church men or women, meant rejection of God? The healing begins when we put the Church and its official representatives in a proper and realistic perspective. The Higher Power is not the Church but all too often is used by Church representatives to justify their unjust and hypocritical response to those whom they have harmed.

Several years ago Jimmy Breslin wrote a book titled The Church that Forgot Christ. As long as people live as if Church equals hierarchy, the wounds will never heal and Christ will never be remembered.