

Former LIVOTF Co-chair **Dan Bartley**, now VOTF president, is quoted in Sunday's Newsday article

## **“Church Watchdog Revitalized”**

**“We want to move away from just anger and we want to work toward transforming the church,” he said.**

**“It's a more solution-driven, action-based organization, and it's resonating.”**

Article by Bart Jones      January 3, 2010

Seven years ago when the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal erupted, a new group of lay people called the Voice of the Faithful overnight turned into a powerful voice. They denounced the abuse and called for church reform.

But this summer the group was nearly forced to close its national headquarters. Its finances hit rock bottom, membership dropped and critics complained it lacked focus.

Voice of the Faithful - whose Long Island chapter is its largest after the one in Boston where the group was born - says it has since rebounded. And a recent decision by the Vatican clearing Msgr. Alan Placa of sex abuse allegations has given the group renewed energy to continue fighting to change the church.

"The Alan Placa case clearly demonstrates that Catholics must remain vigilant when it comes to protecting children and skeptical with regard to the church's ability to self-police itself," said Dan Bartley, former president of the Long Island group and now president of the national organization.

Placa, 65, formerly a high ranking priest in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, was found not guilty of molesting Richard Tollner in the mid-1970s when Tollner was a student at the now-defunct St. Pius X Preparatory Seminary in Uniondale.

Placa was never charged with a crime by civil authorities. After the Vatican ruling he was returned to the priesthood after a seven-year suspension.

Sean Dolan, a spokesman for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, said the lay group's criticism of the decision and its general posture shows it is out of touch with most Catholics.

"The case demonstrates that there are dissident groups who will not stop trying to harm the church including the faithful priests within it rather than defend the independent and objective decision that was rendered and affirmed," he said.

After the sex abuse scandal, most people believed the church made great strides in protecting young people, Dolan added, but the Voice of the Faithful never recognized that.

Bartley responded that the group supported sex abuse victims at a time when "the church hierarchy just wanted them to go away."

While the sex abuse scandal gave birth to Voice of the Faithful, this summer it had to make an emergency appeal for \$60,000 to keep its national headquarters afloat. It netted double that in three weeks, though, and a national conference on Long Island in October attracted 600 people.

Observers debate why the group hit hard times. The group's leaders say almost all nonprofits saw donations drop sharply amid the recession. They also say it is natural for any volunteer group's participation to drop after seven years, and that some members became frustrated with slow change in the church. Plus, the issue that sparked the group's formation faded from headlines.

"It became a lethal combination," said Jessica Lillie, a spokeswoman for the national group in Needham, Mass.

Charles Funk of Mount Sinai, a founding member of the LI chapter, said he gradually dropped out because of the group's heavy focus on church structures and hierarchy. "It's an obsession to the exclusion of other valid, more compelling issues" including war, poverty and hate crimes, he said.

The group says its national membership has dropped from as many as 37,000 to 30,000. After the summer crisis, the group implemented a new financial plan that includes dues for members. It also cut the national office budget from \$750,000 three years ago to \$360,000.

The group has also rolled out a new five-point "Voices in Action" plan that calls for focusing on local actions, such as increasing laity's role in a local parish, rather than just critiquing global church structures.

Bartley said he believes the plan will revitalize the group. "We want to move away from just anger, and we want to work toward transforming the church," he said. "It's a more solution-driven, action-based organization, and it's resonating."

LIVOTF active member **Edward J. Thompson, Sr.** submitted the following  
Letter to Newsday's Editor

## **“VOTF as a Watch Dog”**

VOTF will continue to voice its opposition...

**“so we can take back our beloved Church from those who foolishly want to  
make believe that Vatican II never happened.”**

Submitted on January 4, 2010

Dear Letters Editor:

Re: your article on *Voice of the Faithful* as a watch dog of the Catholic Church, it occurs to me that VOTF is not a dissident group when it tries to recapture the meaning of the Second Vatican Council's statements on decentralizing the authority in the Church. There is a beautifully written document, *Lumen Gentium*, which called for both local bishops and laity to exercise more control and authority in the Church. Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI rolled back these reforms bringing back the old notions of centralization of power and authority.

One only needs to look at two recent developments: the investigation of American Sisters and the incomprehensible new translations of the missal. Both are products of Rome's authority and control. When the bishops and people complained about Rome's incursions into local matters, they were largely ignored. *VOTF* will continue to voice its opposition to these developments so we can take back our beloved Church from those who foolishly want to make believe that Vatican II never happened.