

When Wolves Dress Like Sheep: A Close Look at Voice of the Faithful

CRISIS Magazine - Special Report
by Deal W. Hudson

Lately, we've been hearing a lot about a group called Voice of the Faithful (VOTF). The media's coverage is invariably positive, playing up the group's proactive stance towards renewing the Church and holding bishops accountable for their actions. Now, I tend to be suspicious of any Catholic group the mainstream media supports. And as I began to take a closer look at VOTF, it became pretty clear that it's not as "faithful" as it claims.

What it boils down to is this: Voice of the Faithful is simply another group of dissenters, plain and simple. It parades under the false guise of being centrist, apolitical, and faithful to the Magisterium. Even readers of CRISIS have been drawn to its message. And why not? It seems harmless enough on the surface, and a lot of well-intentioned people are joining up. But make no mistake; VOTF is a wolf in sheep's clothing. And it's using this tragedy in our Church to advance its own political and theological agenda. CRISIS has compiled the following special report so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not you really want an organization like VOTF representing YOUR voice. Please forward this report to anyone you think would benefit from the information. Believe me, you won't find THIS in the newspapers.

Humble Beginnings

Voice of the Faithful began in January 2002 as a support group for parishioners who wanted to express their concerns about the sex-abuse scandal. What started in one church basement in Wellesley, Massachusetts, has now grown into a full-blown organization with a contact list of over 22,000 names, new branches (called "Parish Voices") cropping up all over the country, and its own conference held on July 20, 2002 with over 4,000 attendees.

If you visit its Web site (www.votf.org), you are greeted with Voice of the Faithful's slogan: "Keep the Faith, Change the Church." Leaders of VOTF are very adamant that their group is neither left-wing nor right-wing, but that it addresses universal concerns of ALL Catholics across the board. Also listed on the site is the group's mission statement, which 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." Following the mission statement are the three main goals of VOTF: to "support those who have been abused, support priests of integrity, [and] shape structural change within the church."

But notice the bait-and-switch tactic used in listing its three goals. Everyone can rally behind the cry of supporting faithful priests and the abused, but "change within the church" could encompass a variety of "changes" that are well outside the Church's teaching. Most people agree that some sort of change is needed, but it dodges the REAL question: What kind of change? What role do lay Catholics have in changing the Church? And how do you know that you're keeping the authentic Faith?

Being "attentive to the Spirit" is hardly reassuring. What about being attentive to the magisterium or Tradition? Appealing to the Spirit sounds a lot like those who advocate radical change in the Church while finding recourse in the "spirit" of Vatican II. Too much emphasis on one's personal interpretation of the Spirit can very easily lead one away from the Church and its teachings.

The VOTF Players

While VOTF has been operating largely on a volunteer basis up to this point, many of those associated with its leadership are involved with other dissenting groups, like Call to Action (www.cta-usa.org), CORPUS, and We Are the Church (www.we-are-church.org). Jan Leary, for example, a member of VOTF's steering committee, serves as the contact for Save Our Sacrament/Annulment Reform.

But this barely scratches the surface. Many of the people invited to speak at VOTF's national convention on July 20 espouse other radical views that are not in line with Church teaching. The following people were all invited to speak at the Boston conference:

1. Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic thought at Temple University. Well-known for his work in the formation of a "global ethic" with dissenting theologian Hans Kung, Swidler is also the founder of the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church (www.arcc-catholic-rights.org). As the chair of the association's constitution international drafting committee, he's responsible for drawing up a constitution for a more "democratic" church which includes the proposal for elected leaders; term limits for those leaders; a legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government; and opening up leadership positions to all people, including "women and minorities."

2. James Carroll, columnist for the *Boston Globe*. Carroll, a self-described Catholic, was ordained a priest in 1969 but left the priesthood in 1974 and married before his laicization, effectively excommunicating himself. His columns in the *Globe* confirm that he believes in contraception, abortion, and women's ordination. Additionally, he rejects numerous fundamental Church teachings, such as the divinity of Jesus Christ. In a July 16 column, Carroll stated that at the VOTF convention, "deeper questions must be confronted as well -- the role of the laity in church governance, assumptions of sexual morality, the place of women, the pathologies of clericalism, the 'creeping infallibility' that corrupts church teaching."

3. Debra Haffner, a member and former president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). SIECUS promotes guidelines for sex education for children grades K-12, guidelines which approve of children ages 5-8 being taught about masturbation and homosexuality and children ages 12-15 learning about contraceptives and where to get them.

Haffner is also the cofounder of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing (www.religionproject.org). The institute's "Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing" calls for "theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities; full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in congregational life, including their ordination and the blessing of same sex unions...[and] support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denomination."

1. Tom Groome, professor of theology at Boston College. Groome gave an interview to BBC 4 World Forum on the sex-abuse scandal in which he commented on the Church: "Catholic Christians are...distinguishing between their faith in the tradition and their faith in the institution.... The Church is terribly important to us, but we won't exaggerate the importance, as it were, of the institution." On priestly celibacy and women's ordination: "I think that [priestly celibacy] has to be revisited, likewise the exclusion of women from ministry has to be rethought. But that's not a liberal position...." On ecclesial hierarchy: "I would love to see an overhaul in how our bishops are chosen because right now they're chosen by a kind of subterfuge – a kind of backroom politics." And finally, on the pope: "I do think that the problem of an enfeebled pope becomes fairly transparent, especially when the Church faces such a tragedy in a crisis time as we are in at the moment."

2. Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Dillon has published several books, including *Debating Divorce: Moral Conflict in Ireland*; *Gay and Lesbian Catholics*; and *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*, a work focusing on why "pro-change" Catholics (such as those who support abortion, women's ordination, and homosexuality) remain in the Church.

Discerning the Spirit

Nowhere are problems with VOTF clearer than in its document on change, titled "*Discerning the Spirit: A Guide for Renewing and Restructuring the Catholic Church*." The guide refers to our Church's "clerical culture" that is noted for its "power and secrecy...isolation from the laity...ignorance of the human body and sex, a mindset that degrades women and marriage, [and] a spiritually distorted, psychologically troubled view of celibacy." Here, the argument quickly devolves from a real problem seen in the current scandal – clericalism – to a misinterpretation of Church teaching on women, marriage, and celibacy. These are then lumped together so that if a person accepts the first claim, he must automatically accept the second. A typical bait-and-switch technique.

The guide also relies heavily on the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* to support VOTF's push for a more "democratic" Catholic Church. It quotes the following passage in support of greater lay governance in the Church: "Thus every layman, by virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living

instrument of the mission of the Church herself" (LG §33). However, lay involvement is quite a different thing from the kind of "democratic" Church that VOTF so desperately wants. The establishment of a democratic Church was not the intent of Vatican II, as a later passage in *Lumen Gentium* explains: "The laity should promptly accept in Christian obedience what is decided by the pastors who, as teachers and rulers of the Church, represent Christ" (LG §37). This kind of selective reading of Church documents can be dangerously misleading.

Finally, the guide urges renewal of the Church so that it "will more clearly express the American features of the beautiful face of Christ." This renewal involves the laity "in discerning the Spirit's intentions for today's society and times." Again, no mention is made of any authority other than a private interpretation of the Spirit. In this way, VOTF is paving the way for a separate American Catholic Church based on popular public sentiment. It's true that lay involvement is crucial to addressing this present crisis. But that involvement CAN'T be about changing Catholic doctrine handed to us by Christ. This is the fundamental point VOTF appears to miss.

Robbing Peter to Pay Voice of the Faithful

Voice of the Faithful has begun its own charity drive called Voice of Compassion to serve as a substitute to Bernard Cardinal Law's annual appeal. Those boycotting the cardinal's fund-raiser because of the scandal could give to VOTF, who in turn would give the money to the diocese...but ONLY if the funds went directly to charities and not to fund the diocese. While this may sound fine to a lot of justly outraged Boston Catholics, it's a little more complicated than what VOTF would have us believe.

The money raised in the cardinal's appeal doesn't go into Cardinal Law's pocket. Rather, it's spent on many important programs that rely on the fund-raiser to keep them afloat. For example, the money helps pay the salaries of all the people who work in the Church. It also goes towards Catholic schools and other programs run directly through the diocese, like youth ministry and RCIA. In other words, the cardinal's appeal helps keep the entire diocese running. The Voice of Compassion fund, on the other hand, is only giving money to the kinds of programs VOTF wants to fund. On top of that, VOTF just announced that it's starting an additional fund-raiser in order to keep its own operation running, to the tune of \$1 million. In short, it encourages people not to contribute to the cardinal's appeal, a fund-raiser that helps keep the local churches above water, but then asks these same people to contribute to its OWN appeal to bankroll its own organization.

A Free Voice?

One simple reason why a lot of people are suspicious of VOTF is that many of them feel uncomfortable with VOTF's presumption that it represents the real "voice" of faithful lay Catholics. The organization's leaders claim that they're open to all voices in the Church, whether on the right or left, and that they encourage an open exchange of ideas with room for all under the VOTF banner. To facilitate this exchange, VOTF set up a message board on its Web site where users could post questions, concerns, and opinions that could then be discussed openly. But this open forum quickly became restricted – users were given only two small windows of time a day when they could post messages, and even then they had to limit their posts to three a day. Some forum members began a discussion of the dubious background of Debra Haffner, but their e-mail posts were immediately deleted. A post made last Saturday by an administrator read, "Posts in regard to this message boards decision [to delete the Haffner thread] will not be accepted. Inquiries to admin. about this thread will not be answered. The board may go on view only for an extended period of time. The possibility of shutting the board down is being seriously considered." Shortly thereafter, the board was shut down completely.

While it's possible the board needed to be removed for other reasons, the most glaring likelihood is the group's unwillingness to tolerate criticism of anything related to VOTF. Its own cover-up and dismissal of public concern is astoundingly similar to the actions of the very bishops it criticizes. Voice of the Faithful is no more trustworthy in providing a free "voice" than any other group. And yet, it insists it's the voice for faithful Catholics. In the end, VOTF has every right to its own voice and opinion. There have always been dissenting groups in the Church, and VOTF isn't saying anything new. The real problem is its patent dishonesty: It claims to be faithful to the Magisterium while rejecting the teachings of the Catholic Church. Claiming that it's "faithful" doesn't make it so. Nor can Voice of the Faithful be considered in any way the voice of the one true Church.

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