

Some Attending Voice of the Faithful Meetings Find They Have No Voice

by Greg Byrnes

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Voice of the Faithful says it stands for giving the laity a greater voice in the running of the Church. But apparently, some concerned Catholics are not allowed a voice at the reform group's own meetings. Some people suspect Voice of the Faithful, a self-proclaimed reform movement founded in the wake of the clerical sex-abuse scandals, has a hidden agenda and is an organ of dissent from Church teaching. Some Catholics attempting to bring traditional Church teaching to discussions at chapter meetings find themselves marginalized and in some cases subjected to old-fashioned political hardball.

The Diocese of Providence, R.I., allows Voice of the Faithful to use Church property for meetings. Mark Gordon joined Voice of the Faithful after he logged onto its Web site, while Lawrence Burns joined at a meeting at Christ the King Church in Kingston, R.I. Both attended several public meetings, where they apparently didn't make many friends in high places. In June, they were blocked from attending a closed working sessions for members only.

Gordon and Burns said they joined Voice of the Faithful so they could witness to authentic Church teaching to people who were being misled by dissenters. "We were known to be members, but when it came time for this meeting our names had disappeared from the membership rolls," Gordon said. "We left. We didn't make a scene, and then we sent a protest to the national organization. They were shocked and said any meeting, open or closed, should be open to organization members."

But the sentiment of some in the national organization, based in Boston, was not shared in Rhode Island. "It was a power play," Gordon said. "I protested to the local coordinator about our exclusion. The response was that I was not really a member of Voice of the Faithful in spirit. I was really a Trojan horse. Effectively, [the coordinator of the group] was trying to play a heavy-handed political game. We have informed him we are not giving this up. We are not going to be hounded out of Voice of the Faithful." A Voice of the Faithful spokeswoman, Luise Dittrich, attributed such clashes to the "growing pains" of the young organization. She added that some people have joined in order to disrupt meetings.

The tendency of Voice of the Faithful to feature dissenting speakers has eroded support it enjoyed or might have enjoyed. Raymond Flynn, former mayor of Boston and former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, was recently named spokesman for Your Catholic Voice, a group dedicated to presenting Catholic social teaching in the public forum. He heard many firsthand complaints about dissent in Voice of the Faithful. "I had a political talk radio program and spoke to literally hundreds of people," Flynn said. "[Some] people were very disillusioned with church, but others were disillusioned with the movements that were being developed. These movements took on a tone that really was more committed to almost radical doctrinal change. It wasn't that they were really interested in their voice being heard but in demanding that their political philosophy be accepted." Flynn noted: "The goal was, if you cannot destroy the Church's message, you destroy the messenger: discredit the leaders, discredit the priesthood."

Michael Galloway, co-founder of Your Catholic Voice, added that there are at present certain "angry Catholics who have a bone to pick with the Church, who want to change the Church by their rules." He believes this makes it difficult to present Catholic social teaching as a basis for public-policy decisions.

Voice of the Faithful's avowed goal of a more democratic Church hit a rough patch at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. Some attendees at a foundational meeting of the Worcester affiliate were told two-thirds majority vote of those attending was needed to start the group. When the resolution failed to get the supermajority of votes, the Worcester chapter was founded anyway, according to Laurie Letourneau, a Massachusetts pro-life activist, and Victor Melfa, president of the Holy Cross Cardinal Newman Society, who were at the meeting. Those not in agreement were simply free not to join.

Silenced

Carol McKinley, a member of the Massachusetts chapter of Faithful Vice, an organization that declares its loyalty to the Magisterium, was concerned about what she heard about Voice of the Faithful and asked permission to attend a meeting of 45 Boston Voice of the Faithful chapters in Newton, Mass., in June. "I wanted to go as a faithful of the

Archdiocese of Boston," she said, "but I am not a member of this organization. . .I wanted to see the path they were going in. I was denied access to the meeting because this was just for members and they wanted to discuss their actions with so-called freedom."

McKinley has also repeatedly asked to meet with the leaders of the national Voice of the Faithful organization to clarify their positions, but they have failed to respond to her. Her own organization was started after individuals attending Voice of the Faithful meetings became concerned with the number of dissenting authors brought in to speak. "When the authors would present a heresy or error, we would stand up and direct them to the Catechism and deposit of faith." McKinley said. "This led to various techniques of silencing and in some places eventually lockouts to orthodox faithful. It makes their voting go a lot smoother if they lock out the voices who are obedient to the Catechism and Magisterium." She said there was a "dichotomy" between what Voice of the Faithful was saying to the press and to the bishops and "what was really happening on the parish level."

The keynote speaker at the Newtown meeting was Paul Lakeland, who teaches liberation theology and is chairman of the religious studies department at Fairfield University in Connecticut. In his recent book *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church*, Lakeland advocates that the laity be liberated from the shackles of clerical oppression. Given his status in Voice of the Faithful circles and his leadership position at a Catholic university, some argue that Lakeland's radical theories might be the blueprint for "structural change" Voice of the Faithful advocates for the Church but has not yet officially articulated. If so, it would brand Voice of The Faithful as a full-fledged organ of dissent and would mark its radical break with Church teachings.

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