

## Voice of the Faithful

by Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The sexual-abuse crisis has generated consequences for the Catholic Church: most bad, some good. The hope is that, in the long run, the Church will emerge from this crisis even stronger than before—spiritually, ministerially, and structurally.

One of the most promising short-term effects that may help to realize this long-term hope is the evident determination of Catholic laity to involve themselves more directly in the Church's decision-making processes.

There is nothing particularly novel or revolutionary about this development. Almost 40 years ago, the Second Vatican Council called upon the laity to play a more meaningful role in the internal life of the Church: "As sharers in the role of Christ the Priest, the Prophet, and the King, the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church" (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, n. 10).

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was just as specific. The laity share equally, although in different ways, with the hierarchy, clergy, and religious in the three-fold mission of Christ—of teaching, ruling, and sanctifying (n. 30).

Pastors "were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world." They must recognize the

ministries and charismatic gifts that the laity also have and they must work with the laity so that "all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart."

Vatican II urged that pastoral councils, made up of laity, religious, and clergy, and presided over by the bishop, be established in every diocese (Decree on the Bishop's Pastoral Office in the Church, n. 27), and that bishops not only seek the advice of laity but also "allow [them] freedom and room for action," encouraging them to "undertake tasks on [their] own initiative" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 37).

"The Church," the council declared, "has not been truly established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ [in the world], unless there exists a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy" (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, n. 21).

The same spirit of collaboration must exist at the parish level as well. The council urged parish priests to listen to their parishioners "willingly," to take their opinions and recommendations seriously, and to "recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human

activity" (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, n. 9).

The laity, therefore, are not restricted to the temporal order alone, leaving the bishops and priests to manage the affairs of the Church without lay involvement. On the contrary, the laity "exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders" (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, n. 5).

On Saturday, July 20, a congress was held in Boston's Hynes Auditorium under the auspices of a new and rapidly growing lay organization called Voice of the Faithful. Some 4,000 people attended.

Voice of the Faithful was founded in January of this year, just as the sexual-abuse scandal began to unfold. The idea was conceived by Dr. James Muller, an internationally recognized cardiologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and a recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 as a co-founder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. Dr. Muller launched Voice of the Faithful as a way of responding constructively to the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

The group began meeting at St. John's Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and has grown rapidly

since then. The basic details are available on its web site: [www.votf.org](http://www.votf.org).

Voice of the Faithful's mission statement is simple and straightforward: "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."

Its goals are threefold: 1. Support those who have been abused; 2. Support priests of integrity; and 3. Shape structural change within the Church. These goals are encapsulated in the organization's motto: "Keep the Faith, Change the Church."

Whether Voice of the Faithful or any similar lay initiative will continue to flourish as a pastorally effective force in the Church long after the current crisis disappears from the media's radar screens is something that no one can predict at this juncture.

What one can safely predict, however, is that the hopes of Vatican II will never be fulfilled without the direct and meaningful involvement of laity in the life and mission of the Catholic Church.

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