

June 24, 2007 - Catholic Lay Group Tests a Strategy Change

By PAM BELLUCK, The New York Times

BOSTON, June 23 — Voice of the Faithful, the lay group formed in response to the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, is calling for the Vatican to review the requirement that priests be celibate, saying the policy may have played a role in the scandal.

The position represents a shift in the approach of the organization, which has avoided raising such controversial issues. It comes as Voice of the Faithful faces a budget deficit from a drop-off in large donations and finds itself at a crossroads in direction.

“It’s tough to keep momentum going over a long period of time,” said Bill Casey, the group’s chairman, “and I think what we need to do is to refocus our organization’s leadership and energy. What we have to do is convince the average Catholic that there is a strong continuing need for an independent lay voice in the governance of the Catholic Church.”

Formed five years ago when two dozen suburban Boston parishioners gathered in anguish over the emerging abuse crisis, its message — “Keep the Faith, Change the Church” — and nonconfrontational approach to church leaders attracted 35,000 worldwide members, according to the group.

Voice of the Faithful helped press some dioceses into being more transparent in dealing with abuse cases and finances, joined fights to extend statutes of limitation for sexual abuse, and persuaded some parish leaders to allow greater lay involvement.

Now, it faces a \$100,000 deficit in a budget of about \$700,000, and Mr. Casey said at an April meeting that the group was in a “stuck position,” with arguments over leadership and decision-making.

Some members have long urged embrace of confrontational subjects they consider critical to church problems and priest shortages, like clerical celibacy or ordination of women.

“We’ve repeatedly rejected that argument, saying that those are not our issues,” said James E. Post, the group’s first president, who remains on its board. “Even I, from time to time, wonder whether we shouldn’t just declare victory and say a lot’s been done in five years, the church is doing better than it was, and then let the other organizations — Call to Action, Future Church and others that really want to deal with these issues — have the field.”

Instead, this summer, Voice of the Faithful will “be calling for the Vatican to do an ecclesiastical review of the celibacy issue,” said the group’s president, Mary Pat Fox. Ms. Fox said a review was not the same as seeking to end mandatory celibacy and was consistent with the group’s principles because research showed “it plays a role in the abuse crisis.”

“It’s not that celibacy drives someone to be an abuser,” she said. “It plays a role in creating this culture of secrecy that then caused the bishops to handle the crisis the way they did” because “you’re calling for a group to be celibate, and any deviations from that is something that you have to keep quiet.”

The group’s leaders are bracing for reaction.

“The minute the word celibacy is in anything, it’s going to be: ‘There they go — they’ve lost their center,’ and other people will be saying ‘finally,’ ” Mr. Casey said.

The struggle confronting Voice of the Faithful comes as publicity about the scandal has waned and the church’s image has improved. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University found that in October 2005, 74 percent of Catholics surveyed were “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with American bishops’ leadership, up from 53 percent in mid-2002.

“None of us can stay mad forever,” said Thomas Groome, director of Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College. “Certainly the sentiment or emotions that initially drove Voice of the Faithful wouldn’t sustain them.”

Some members wonder “how much time do we want to spend working collaboratively with bishops who aren’t interested in being worked with collaboratively,” Mr. Casey said. “I don’t think there’s any example across the country where what we would desire to have is in place, but in some places there has been an openness to conversation.”

Then again, quiet relations with some bishops have lowered the group’s profile. In Boston, where the scandal erupted and forced the resignation of Cardinal Bernard F. Law, Archbishop Sean P. O’Malley and aides have met with the group but still ban many chapters from meeting in churches.

“O’Malley has mastered what Muhammad Ali calls the rope-a-dope,” Dr. Post said, referring to when a boxer leans back on the ropes and lets his opponent punch him until the opponent tires out.

“What people really want to do,” Dr. Post added, “is see two people slugging it out. In those places where we’ve had a public conflict we’ve been able to rally people.”

Asked to comment, the Boston Archdiocese said only that it “welcomes all people to assist us in building up the Catholic Church,” adding that it had its own vehicles for lay participation.

Experts say Voice of the Faithful, like many young nonprofits, must retool for long-term survival.

To reinvigorate itself, the group recently hired a part-time development director to raise money and issued a strengthened “statement of identity” that “the patterns that led to abuse and cover up, and to increasing instances of clerical financial misconduct, still prevail.”

Raising the issue of celibacy is not likely to ingratiate the group with more bishops, said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“There are lots of other groups that are talking about celibacy,” Sister Walsh said. “Don’t waste the bishops’ time on it — they can’t do anything about it. You might as well have a great discussion on what goes on on Mars.”

But R. Scott Appleby, a Notre Dame history professor, said the group’s longevity depended on changing its approach.

“They outlived what some skeptics would have said their shelf life was,” Professor Appleby said. “But if they choose to be a status quo organization, trying not to make waves and not to be confrontational, it’s exceedingly likely that they won’t attract attention and won’t recruit new members. And that they won’t change anything.”