

Excerpt from The Word From Rome

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On March 19, I spoke at a Voice of the Faithful conference on Long Island, N.Y. Some 500 people showed up -- mostly, I'm sure, drawn by Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, the prophet who anticipated the American sexual abuse crisis back in the 1980s, and by the opportunity to network with one another.

I missed Doyle's presentation, because I had to come out to Long Island by the morning train. According to a Newsday report, however, he told the group that, "The issue is basically power," urging laity to "move from infancy to adulthood" in their attitudes toward church leaders.

The nation's bishops, he reportedly said, "are still putting a Band-Aid over a cancer."

Doyle today works as an addiction counselor in Maryland.

The on-going fallout of the crisis was clear at the gathering. The corridors outside the hotel ballroom, for example, were dominated by posters containing information on 39 priests accused of abuse who had either worked for, or in, the Rockville Centre diocese, the main ecclesiastical jurisdiction on Long Island. The posters were produced by BishopAccountability.org, a reform organization that has also posted data on the group's web site.

I had been asked to speak on the election of the next pope, a subject of perennial Catholic interest, and this group seemed typically eager to think through what's at stake for the church and the various scenarios one might anticipate.

Afterwards, I met Juan Vaca, one of a handful of ex-members of the Legionaries of Christ who have brought sexual abuse allegations against Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the order's founder. Vaca, once the head of the Legionaries in the United States, today lives on Long Island.

I had a brief chat with Vaca before I had to catch a train back to Manhattan. He told me that he's active in a local Long Island parish, and sees his efforts to bring to light what he regards as the truth about Maciel and the Legionaries as a "mission."

Those charges have been repeatedly denied both by the Legionaries and by Maciel himself. Recently, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith took steps to re-activate a complaint against Maciel filed by Vaca and the other accusers. At the same time, however, several senior Vatican officials, as well as the pope, have made recent public statements praising both Maciel and the Legionaries.

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I suppose Voice of the Faithful is one of those groups conventionally labeled "controversial," in the sense that people hold widely differing opinions about it. For some, it's the best thing to come out of the crisis, a grass-roots movement among laity to make the Catholic church more accountable, transparent and participatory. For others, VOTF is an object lesson in the dangers of smuggling interest groups and secular politics into the church. For one thing, these critics say, VOTF sets up a "laity vs. the hierarchy" dynamic that's not consistent with good ecclesiology; for another, they say, in at least some places VOTF is just the same old liberal activists under another flag.

VOTF members are obviously aware that the organization is not uniformly beloved. Indeed, the March 19 event took place at a hotel rather than on church property precisely because their relationship with Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Center has been troubled.

A couple of the organizers of the Long Island event asked me if I had been "hassled" for agreeing to speak to them.

In fact, I didn't experience any blowback. If I had, I would have responded that dialogue in the church means keeping everyone in the conversation. I simply don't believe that speaking to a group necessarily implies endorsing its agenda, whatever that might be; I think it can also mean a desire to build relationships based on sympathy and mutual respect. (I said the same thing, by the way, when some Catholic liberals raised questions about my accepting an invitation to speak at Archbishop Charles Chaput's seminary in Denver last year.)

Many of the people I met in Long Island went out of their way to say that they were not activists by temperament, and neither were they liberal radicals -- a few, in fact, made a point of telling me they had voted for George Bush. (One guy said to me that if Bush can bring democracy to the Middle East, maybe there's hope for the church!) Yet, they said, the sex abuse crisis convinced them that the church they love needs help.

Moreover, these people are backing up their talk with their time and treasure. I learned Saturday that the woman who processed all the tickets for the conference at which I spoke, Ileen Weidig, did so from home while recovering from an appendectomy. Meanwhile the woman who organized the speakers, Pat Paone, also worked from home while suffering from a case of the shingles so severe it left her blind much of the time. Yet both soldiered on, unpaid, because both believe something important is at stake.

It's a matter of fair debate whether VOTF's platform of "keep the faith, change the church" is ultimately adequate, given that some elements of ecclesiastical structure are based on faith convictions about Christ's will for the church. It's fair, too, to ask whether there's enough spiritual depth, enough sense of being part of a worldwide family of faith, in the VOTF project in at least some instances. At the same time, it's equally fair to observe that VOTF members across the country have repeatedly reached out to bishops in a spirit of collaboration and dialogue, and sometimes they've been spurned. Pope John Paul II said on Sept. 12, 2004, in an address to the bishops of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, that "participation, consultation and shared responsibility" are an "intrinsic requirement of the exercise of episcopal authority." The experience of VOTF to date suggests the American church still has some ground to cover to implement that vision.

All that, however, can be talked out in dialogue with church authorities and other voices in the Catholic conversation. The important thing to note, it seems to me, is that the VOTF folk I met in Long Island came across as decent, faithful people trying to do something positive for the church.

Surely that's something upon which one can build.