

January, 2008 - VOTF and the Reform of the Governmental Structure of the Catholic Church

Thomas Doyle, Voice from the Desert

If one looks at what has happened in the institutional Catholic Church since 1965, the year that Vatican II ended, one sees a roller-coaster ride of progressive advances and regressive retreats. Since the reign (and I use that word intentionally, rather than “pontificate”) of John Paul II the institution has been on what some call a restorationist path. This refers to the process of restoring the Catholic Church to the splendor of the pre-Vatican II days when bishops were princes, the pope was the emperor and the lay people kept their mouths shut and their wallets open.

All along there has been a movement among some lay, cleric and hierarchical Catholics to continue with the vision of Vatican II. Today, all of the bishops in that movement in the US are either dead, retired or in exile. The “Vatican II” clergy are growing old, discouraged, tired and are either retired or have left altogether. They have been replaced by a couple generations of younger clergy who often describe themselves as “John Paul II” priests. Others describe them as the ‘Catholic Taliban,’ “the Young Nazis” or words to that effect. Lately several scholars have written about them and the assessment is worse than discouraging. It’s frightening.

The need for deep reform exploded to the surface in January, 2002 with the revelations in Boston that Catholic bishops had been hiding, enabling and supporting sexually dysfunctional criminals in the priesthood. VOTF started off and brought with it hope, a voice for anger, disillusionment and frustration. Now we are five years down the road from January 6, 2002. This was not the beginning salvo of the clergy abuse assault. That happened in summer of 1984 with the revelations in Louisiana that the bishop there had done was Bernard Law had done...but Lafayette is not Boston and the Times of Acadiana is not the Boston Globe.

The years since have brought staggering changes that no one expected. Thus far the cost in dollars to the U.S. church that Ray Mouton, Mike Peterson and I predicted....one billion....has been exceeded and, if all the numbers were revealed honestly, it’s probably doubled. The costs for California alone, thanks to the narcissism of Roger Mahony, have gone beyond a billion.

The U.S. bishops still live in their delusional world as far as clergy abuse is concerned. The Dallas Charter, the diocesan review boards, the National Review Board, the Office for Child Protection....all are bureaucratic attempts to right the wrongs, make the bad memories go away, restore trust and faith in the bishops and above all, create the false image that it’s all over. As Archbishop Gregory said in Feb. 2004, the “the history of sexual abuse is today history.” More inaccurate words have never been spoken! Bishops continue to force victims through incredibly painful and demeaning court processes in which they and their lawyers do all they can to revictimize them. In State legislatures throughout the country, State Catholic Conferences and the local bishops spend millions of the faithful’s dollars to defeat any legislation that would offer greater protection to child victims. They insult our collective intelligence with a variety of false claims based on erroneous information. They bring in their so-called experts to tell the legislatures how much they have done and how much they care and how much they respect our U.S. legal system. The bottom line is that in State after State, the only opposition to child protective legislation is the Catholic Church. How ironic! The world’s largest religious organization which is based on the mission of Christ and it opposes State laws that do what it not only could not do, but would not do...protect children from deranged predators and self-centered institutional enablers.

What about VOTF? The past five years have been tumultuous. The “growing pains” that some members speak of are far more than that. What we have seen has been a clash between the deeply rooted clerical dependency that has been systematically woven into our very being by the institutional church, and Catholic Adulthood. It’s a long, excruciatingly painful process to grow up in the Catholic Church. Most chronological adults never make it. No matter how liberated and avant-garde they believe themselves to be, there is still a very powerful core, deep down inside, that causes dependency feelings to take over whenever one is faced with the challenge of taking the risk of not only thinking but acting like an adult when in the realm of the Church world. To do so means to challenge the clerical office holders and to express opinions that they do not want to hear. To do so means taking the risk that some of them might try to capitalize on the magical thinking that has supported their power by threatening canonical penalties or equating disobedience to them with disobedience to Christ.

Jesus Christ was all about love. He also was a man of action. Whenever he encountered the religious hypocrites of his day he didn’t sit down to tea with them and exchange sweet nothings so that nobody had any ruffled feathers. If he blew his top when he encountered a bunch of hucksters selling birds at the temple can you imagine what his reaction would have been if he’d dropped down to earth during the early days of the reformation? Martin Luther would have ended up the pope and the Roman church bureaucracy would have been vaporized. What would have been his reaction had he appeared at

the chancery in Lafayette, LA in the summer of 1984 when the churchmen and the lawyers were putting together what they thought would be legal agreements that would pay off some families and insure their silence. Even better, how do you think he would have reacted reading the Boston Globe on Sunday morning, January 6, 2002.....the Feast of the Epiphany? I suspect that the epiphany the Globe brought that morning would have been followed by another “wake-up call” of cosmic proportions. Bernard Law might have found himself propelled, not to a palace in the Vatican, but to the outer reaches of Greenland to teach catechism to the natives on the edge of the North Pole.

In addition to the anger, distrust, frustration, disillusionment and spiritual aridity the institutional Church has caused because of its totally inept response to the evil of clergy abuse, there has been another equally toxic reaction and that is the profound feeling of nausea in reaction to the self-serving public relations campaign of the U.S. hierarchy by which they continue to try to flip the whole mess around, make themselves look like victims and demonize anyone who has ever challenged their collective stupidity, cruelty and total lack of compassion.

Is there hope for change from within?

As far as reform etc. is concerned, I have lost all realistic hope that the institution will change for the better in my lifetime. The present crop of bishops, courtesy of John Paul II, is far less pastoral, less theologically educated and more clericalist and monarchical than any I can remember. I see no hope and only constant signs of discouragement. I believe in VOTF but I do not believe that they will ever accomplish any meaningful structural change. It's simply impossible for any such change to happen unless it starts at the top. The Catholic Church is a monarchy. Period! Getting a pastoral council up and running here and there is nothing. Sitting down to tea with a bishop is no more than a sop to keep the activists. They are not able or willing to bend or change their approach in something as vital as clergy sexual abuse so why expect them to even think about giving up any of their power in anything else.

The hot button issues that the popes have told us we can't even talk about will remain discussed by lay and clergy alike and closed in the minds of the pope and the bishops. All you have to do is look at the stream of Vatican decrees re-introducing the pre-Vatican II version of the Latin mass to stomping on theologians to get the picture. The young conservatives lap it up and seem to play at church as if it's some sort of surreal dress-up game. What many fed-up people are doing is simply walking away and finding an alternative faith/worship opportunity that is less toxic and more Christ centered.

I am not much interested in working for internal church reform anymore mainly because my experience within the structure over the past two decades has been so painfully revelatory for me. It is way too toxic. Life is short and being part of the Christian community is supposed to be joyful and not poisonous. I have turned to reading the books of John Shelby Spong and find they give me hope and a voice to my theological ideas and related feelings. I do not expect everyone to be where I am at because no one else has been on my journey. As a matter of fact, one of the more painful breakthroughs I have had is that it's not only inappropriate but simply wrong to project that we are all on the same spiritual wave length and that some are right and some are fundamentally wrong about the way they believe.

I don't see any hope in trying to bring about meaningful reform of the structures. One or the other group may convince a local bishop to take an enlightened approach, but then the day will come when he retires and is replaced and then it's a crap shoot as to what happens.

VOTF has pledged to support Priests of Integrity. There has to be a lot more to this than words and an annual award. There are plenty of good, decent, hard-working priests out there, the center of whose mission and life is not the bishop, pope or Vatican but Jesus Christ. They will never be bishops. They need to be encouraged but not pitied because these men have an inner strength that is grounded in something far deeper and stronger than loyalty to the monarchical system. Maybe what VOTF needs to do is challenge the thousands of priests still in denial who continue to moan and groan because the identified sexual abusers make them all look bad. Not so! What makes Catholic priests look bad is apathy, fear and apparent subservience to a system that is outmoded, unproductive and enabling of those who would victimize others. How many priests have looked at the landscape and privately expressed shame, disgust and anger at the sexual abuse nightmare and the bishops leading role in it....and how many of these same priests have refused to speak out even to a small group for fear of retaliation by the bishop who can't see past the walls of his imaginary kingdom.

VOTF has pledged support for the victims of clergy sexual abuse. This should be the number one priority. Why? Because everything about the clergy abuse nightmare is everything that is wrong with the institution. This is not one of many problems. This is THE problem. People are now getting excited over the revelations of embezzlement and financial mismanagement in Church throughout the US and the world. This is terrible, but we are talking about money here and not human lives. The sex abuse nightmare is a culture of emotional and physical devastation and spiritual murder. If the local

VOTF chapters can't make support and defense of victims their first priority, they should close down. If the national leadership equivocates or cowers in fear of what the bishops will think if they take strong and courageous stands, they need to quit.

A word of wisdom from my military days: "Either lead, follow or get the hell out of the way."

I respect those who continue to work for internal church reform. I am on the board of ARCC (Association for Rights for Catholic in the Church). I respect my fellow board members. I don't believe the institutional Church cares one bit about individual rights or due process when it comes to lay people or lower ranking clerics or anyone who thinks creatively. It cares greatly about protecting the rights and assuring due process for those who are bishops and above.....There are exceptions however. If a bishop stands up for what is right and has the courage to express his stand, he will quickly find himself cast out of the sacred club and into the real church with the rest of us. Tom Gumbleton, probably the only real bishop in the U.S., publicly has stood with victims. The Vatican acted quickly. He was fired on orders from the top because he "broke communion with the bishops." Bravo for Tom! He did what Jesus would have done.

I don't want to expend much more energy tilting at windmills in the world of Catholic Church reform. I have no hope that it will happen. I don't want to spend any more time trudging through what can best be described as a swamp of toxic waste. I believe change will happen because it has happened over the past few years. It has not taken place through dialogue with the hierarchy however. It's happened when the Church office holders (I intentionally don't use the word leaders) have found themselves face to face with powers greater than themselves like the law enforcement agencies or the civil court system. That's where the change will take place. That's why I have consistently urged VOTF leaders to totally support all efforts at legislative change that will provide greater protection to victims.

There has been a vast amount of change and progress since I first became involved in 1984 and especially since 2002. The institutional Church and its bishops would have done nothing to stop institutionalized sexual abuse and done nothing to help the victims it has known about were it not for the fact that we have forced them to do something. If good people back down and believe the nonsense propagated by the public relations machines of the individual dioceses and the National conference of bishops, then we will be back on the road to returning to where we were in 1983. It happened before and it could happen again and it happened before because the hierarchy had too much power, too much influence and too little accountability. That has changed but it hasn't changed enough. There are still countless men and women of every age who cannot come forward to disclose the devastating abuse they have suffered. As long as the clerical-celibate system remains basically untouched, there will always be victims of sexually dysfunctional priests and spiritually dysfunctional bishops.

Is there any hope at all? Yes! The hope is not in the institution or in bureaucratic policies, programs or empty pronouncements. The hope is in the ever increasing number of deeply committed men and women who are being compassionately present to people in need and in pain. These are the men and women of any denomination or belief system or of no denomination but still with a powerful belief system who work with each other to get right to the heart of Christ's message without stopping at any denominational door to get approved by any bishop in order to express charity.