

SOME OBSERVATIONS FOR VOTF

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I haven't commented much on statements issued by VOTF people in the past several months. I realize that my thoughts and opinions on the institutional church are far different from those of many in VOTF, especially people in leadership. I respect and acknowledge this. In the past I have been blunt and critical of plans to dialogue with bishops. I have done so not out of rancor but from a basis of 24 years of hard experience. I surely do not expect people to have reached the same conclusions I have reached based on similar experiences because none have had similar experiences. My hope was that by sharing these experiences I would at least help some avoid the disappointment and disillusionment I have gone through.

Recently however I have seen some things that have prompted me to speak out. The first is the mention of support by the Downtown Brooklyn Chapter of VOTF for the New York bishops' opposition to the Markey Bill. This statement was contained in Bishop DeMarzio's 30 page report, issued in May 2009. The purpose of this report was to garner support for the opposition to the bill. The report contains several misleading and totally erroneous information. When the favorable mention of the Downtown Brooklyn Chapter was seen it resulted in a great deal of anger and disappointment by many sex abuse survivors as well as others who support the victims. Subsequent to the publication of the report I saw a statement in an email to the effect that the report misstated the Downtown Brooklyn chapter's position. Yet there was no public retraction by the chapter nor was there ever any adequate and believable explanation as to how this statement even got into the report. Many of us felt betrayed!

The second issue I wish to refer to is the section entitled "Possible Impact of Legislation" at the conclusion of Dick Grafer's report on finances in the diocese of Rockville Center. The document I refer to is entitled "How Much Is Enough?" The author believes that passage of the Markey Bill or something similar would have a negative impact on the diocese and force a cutback in services. He stated that this happened on the west coast "*where a number of States passed such legislation.*"

In the first place, only California passed such legislation. All are aware that the total of the settlements in California came to well over a billion dollars. All are not aware that the Church's attorneys, who are paid by the hour, accumulated fees in the range of 200 million dollars. This has been especially true in Los Angeles where Cardinal Mahony's lawyers have opposed every case at every step of the way and are now opposing the court ordered disclosure of priest personnel files.

The payments to victims did not result in any cutbacks in any diocese in California. In fact, payments of well deserved settlements to victims have not threatened Church services anywhere. In several instances bishops tried to attribute already planned parish or school

closings on victims' awards and in every instance this was seen to be blatantly false. It is also worth noting that in 2004 the archdiocese of Los Angeles opened a new cathedral the cost of which was about \$124 million dollars. In December of 2004 the Diocese of Orange in California settled with 90 victims for slightly over one hundred million dollars (\$100,000,000.00). Half was paid by insurance and half by the diocese by means of a loan which was totally repaid within two years. The same year the diocese began building a Cathedral that would eventually cost in excess of \$100 million. Next to the cathedral is the \$1.2 million dollar house for the priests.

Then in 2007 the Diocese of Oakland began construction of its own new Cathedral originally estimated at \$131 million. Upon completion this estimate ballooned to a final cost of \$190 million.

In light of these architectural excesses it appears quit ridiculous for any bishop in California to claim that awarding money to the people whose lives and souls the Church has destroyed will cause any impact on Church activities.

Mr. Grafer's statement reflects only one perspective, that of an accountant. It reflects an understanding of "Church" that is sorely limited to what we all see way too much, Church as *corporation* and Church as *business*. The Diocese of Rockville Center has treated victims with consistent disdain and often with brutality. The bishop has acted not like a monarch...that wouldn't be half bad, but like an overly narcissistic tyrant.

The bishops of New York launched an all-out war against the supporters of the Markey bill. They spent millions to employ lobbyists. They regularly resorted to scare tactics founded on lies. In effect, they proved without question, once again, that the bishops in this country are obsessed with their money, their buildings and their power and care naught for the persons whom the clergy have ruined. Their opposition was based on gross selfishness and cared not for the concerns of others who have been trying to promote justice and compassion for all childhood victims of abuse. Mr. Grafer seemed totally oblivious to the scope and devastating impact of clergy sexual abuse and to the refusal of the hierarchy to accept any responsibility for this abuse. His statement also enraged, disappointed and betrayed victims and those who support them.

Finally Mr. Grafer advocates a compromise approach. That might be possible on another planet but the intense experience of countless victims, their attorneys and their supporters have proven without doubt that no compromise with the bishops is possible. Like all things the bishops get involved with it has to be their way or no way. The only way to get anything that remotely resembles accountability out of them is through the civil courts and the only pain they feel is when that which they treasure most is threatened: their money and their power.

Next I wish to cite a brief response to the Vatican investigation of nuns that has been circulating. The author is Ann Brennan from the Chicago area.

The Vatican has launched an aggressive campaign to bring American nuns into submission to its pre-Vatican II ideas of orthodoxy. This is definitely not the time to launch another campaign to bring them into submission to the SNAP agenda, legitimate

though it may be. Not only is the survival of the LCWR at stake, but also the visionary and courageous sisters who elected them and the entire Vatican II inspired progressive movement within the American Catholic Church. We need instead to be campaigning in support of their leadership and ministry, and if anything, calling for a Vatican examination of the Vatican II orthodoxy and lifestyle orthopraxy of American priests and bishops. Anne Brennan, VOTF Chicagoland Northeast.

This sentiment is not only offensive and insulting to victims but it implies that the SNAP “agenda” is akin to other political or theological agendas both in and outside the Church. The SNAP “agenda” is what the radical Christian mandate is all about reaching out to and helping the most rejected. The institutional Church has victimized its most vulnerable and refuses to accord them the justice and compassion that it asks its members to extend to the causes that it selects...causes that do not threaten the ecclesiastical establishment.

The LCWR is hypocritical. The hundreds and perhaps thousands of victims of sexual and physical abuse by religious women in this country alone remain a second elephant in the Church’s ornate living room. Abuse of the vulnerable is not just another excess such as buying autos that are too elegant or having fine wine at meals. The physical and sexual abuse of these people is a harsh reality and not an exaggeration or a myth. If VOTF and Ann Brennan are aware of this their attitude toward justice for victims is deeply flawed and if they are not aware they should become aware. The “*visionary and courageous*” sisters need to clean up their own act before they take on anything else. Ann and the others in VOTF need to know how the victims have been treated by the LCWR leadership.....with arrogance and disdain. These same sisters who now are justifiably complaining about the imperialistic Vatican cabal have acted with just as much arrogance and clericalism as the bishops whom they criticize.

VOTF has announced its next national gathering to take place on October 29, 2009. The event will feature Sr. Joan Chittister and Fr. Tom Reese, both strong and prophetic advocates for the return of the institutional Church to Christianity. Will the survivors of the Church’s vicious abuse be sidelined or completely ignored? Does VOTF need to be reminded once again that it was the shock of the Church’s culture of sexual abuse that inspired a small group in Boston to reclaim their voices?

I speak not from exaggerated notions of what is and what has been. I have been in the front lines and at the core of the “scandal.” I have seen first-hand the absolute duplicity of the hierarchical leaders of this country. They issue statement after eloquent statement, usually prepared by P.R. specialists, about their concern for victims, their successes in dealing with abusive clerics, their awareness of the problem. This blanket of fluff unsuccessful camouflages a harsh reality quite opposite to that which they portray. While they are preaching concern for the victims and apologies for “*mistakes that might have happened in the past*” they continue to oppose any legislation that will help all children, mostly by a barrage of lies and scare tactics. They continue to waste millions of the dollars donated by the remaining “faithful” on their attorneys who fight long and brutal battles with victims in court, often using any manner of disgusting and unethical tactics to discredit and demoralize them.

The credibility of VOTF or any other organization that seeks to reform the institutional Church hinges on whether or not it understands the profound significance of the scandal of sexual abuse of vulnerable persons by clerics and religious. For me this understanding is framed in a question:

How can I believe in a church as an earthly realm of God if the Church's leaders at once claim a divine commission yet knowingly allow their own clerics and religious to devastate the most vulnerable members in the most disgusting and depraved manner imaginable? How can I believe in this Church if those who claim to be essential to its existence sacrifice those whose souls they have plundered for the sake of their own security? How can I believe in a Church when its leaders continue to act as if the center of it is themselves and not the Christ?

How can I believe?