

“Voice of the Faithful” Takes Aim at Pope

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(April 10, 2008) With the Pope’s historic visit on the horizon, the lay Catholic organization, Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), decided it was the perfect time to publish a full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for “structural change” in the Church.

The ad, which ran on Wednesday, April 9, presents a message to Pope Benedict XVI calling for a more open and transparent Church that embraces the gifts and talents of the laity.

“But we cannot attain this transformation until we heal the wounds still open,” the ad states.

It then recounts the sexual abuse crisis and asks, “How can our Church be a moral beacon when so many bishops who repeatedly transferred known predators remain in office? Without justice for the abused and accountability from the bishops, this crisis will continue to plague our Church.”

According to their website, the group claims to have raised \$63,000 to promote this ad campaign. They plan to place additional ads in smaller media and to fund “other communications centered on the papal visit.”

One of those communications is a petition drive which they claim had 25,000 signatures as of April 10. The petition asks signatories to “Join your voice with thousands of others who must raise our voices through petition because the Pope has scheduled no discussions or listening sessions with ordinary laity. Will he hear the concerns of the faithful without such conversations?”

The controversial VOTF was formed in Boston in 2002 in the wake of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. The website says its mission is 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.”

While calling for a “transformed Church,” it also advocates for more support of clerical sexual abuse victims, “priests of integrity,” and shaping “structural change within the Catholic Church in full accordance and harmony with Church teaching.”

When asked to explain what they mean by a “transformed church” the group’s media director, John Moynihan, told *CNA* this means that “the laity be consulted regarding the governance of a parish and in the selection of Bishops as they historically were in the early centuries of our Church’s history.”

One proposal appearing on the Bridgeport, Connecticut branch of VOTF calls for the establishment of a 19 person committee from the diocese that would recommend candidates and then choose a bishop in the event of a vacant episcopal see.

A board member of the Bridgeport VOTF, Joseph F. O’Callaghan, professor emeritus at Fordham University, told *CNA* that this committee should be “elected by and representative of the clergy and people of the diocese, rather than appointed or elected by the bishop, the Diocesan Pastoral Council or the Priests’ Senate.”

In addition, he argued, “The laity, as the majority of the faithful, ought to be the majority on the committee.”

J.D. Flynn, a canon lawyer from Denver, countered this opinion by saying the VOTF plan “seems to come from an innate distrust of clergy that works against the authentic collaboration between laity and clergy that the Second Vatican Council calls for,” he told *CNA*.

He added that the plan seems to “force the hand” of the Pope in selecting a candidate through a form of “media blackmail.”

“This seems disruptive to authentic communion between laity and ecclesiastical leaders, and personally disrespectful to the Holy Father, the pontifical legate, and the episcopal candidates themselves,” he said.

He also pointed out that canon law already expects that the papal legate will consult with the laity in the selection.

“Much of what VOTF calls for in terms of lay, religious and clerical participation in evaluating the needs of the diocese already takes place in a diocesan pastoral council and a diocesan synod,” he explained.

But by calling for a direct election of bishops by a diocesan synod, with no confirmation from the Pope, is “totally unacceptable,” he said.

“To remove the Holy Father, or seek to minimize his role, as the VOTF plan does, is to impede the communion of the divinely instituted college of bishops.”

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