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Voice of the Faithful seeks to expand its challenges to sex abuse, church structures

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 18, 2012
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At a two-day conference in Boston, Voice of the Faithful celebrated 10 years of battling sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy and working to change the church structures that permitted and at times facilitated it. But the 450 conference participants spent most of Friday and Saturday exploring how to continue and expand that struggle over the next decade and beyond.

When the organization was founded in 2002 at the peak of the U.S. scandal of clergy sexual abuse of minors, the organization spoke with "a prophetic voice. Never forget, your voice rose up from your faith, from your love for the church," Fr. Donald Cozzens, writer in residence at John Carroll University in Cleveland, told the gathering Saturday morning.

"When others lost their nerve and their voice, you didn't lose your nerve or your voice," he said. "I salute your courage to come together 10 years ago, to speak your truth to power then, throughout the last decade, now, and into the future. Speaking the truth to power is never easy."

Cozzens, the award-winning author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* and other widely acclaimed books on priesthood in the U.S. today, said that by faith, he meant not only "belief in Jesus Christ and his teaching and his church, but also ... trust.

"You are the voice of the trusting," he told the gathering. "You trust that God's spirit will be with our brothers and sisters wounded by priests and bishops. And you trust that the spirit will be with our wounded church, even in the present darkness. You trust that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to speak your truth to power, to speak words of healing and compassion to the thousands upon thousands who have been sexually exploited by the officers and ministers of the church, and to hold the church to the teachings and vision of the Second Vatican Council.

"So you are to me and to many priests the voice of the faithful, the voice of the brave, the voice of the trusting," he added. "I want to say this loud and clear: No matter what others might say, the Voice of the Faithful is a blessing to the church."

The night before, Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, the keynote speaker at the conference's opening dinner, told the gathering, "Your voice is uniquely American, and it is uniquely Catholic."

Burke, a former chairwoman of the all-lay National Review Board that the bishops formed in 2002 to oversee their progress in combating clergy sexual abuse and promoting the protection of children, said that "as Catholics, we know that the light of faith is far and away more important than our failed leadership or our institutional structure's inability to ... share leadership, authority and equality."

She said the "reformers of the reform" in the church hierarchy are trying to "turn back the hands of time" and reverse reforms of Vatican II.

"Without your voice, here in the United States, everyone's freedom as a Catholic would be even more threatened. Everyone's liberty as a disciple would be more contained. We never needed you more," she said.

In opening remarks at the conference, the organization's president, Mark Mullaney, summarized the focus and work of the organization over the past 10 years. "Throughout these years, we've worked to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, we've worked to support priests of integrity, and we have endeavored to bring about structural change in the church to make sure that such scandals will not occur again and to reclaim our rights as the people of God."

Over the next 10 years, he said, the reform group will continue to support abuse survivors and work for "a further understanding of the clerical culture, what it is and how it affects us, women's rights in the church" and other reform issues, including acceptance of married priests, ordination of women, financial accountability and "lay input into bishops' selection."

Other speakers at the conference included John Morgan, chairman of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland; theologian Thomas Groome, chairman of religious education and pastoral ministry at Boston College; David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, or SNAP; author Jamie L. Manson, an *NCR* columnist and lay minister to the poor; and Fr. James Connell, a Milwaukee archdiocesan canon lawyer and pastor of two parishes in Sheboygan, Wis., who as an advocate of survivors of clergy sexual abuse has pushed for more transparency and accountability in U.S. Catholic norms and practices on clergy sex abuse and child protection.

At the end of its opening dinner, the group presented its annual Priest of Integrity Award to Fr. Patrick Bergquist of the Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska, whose book, *A Long Dark Winter's Night, Reflections of a Priest in a Time of Pain and Privilege*, has been hailed for capturing the spirit of good priests grieving the wounds caused by the clergy sexual abuse of minors.

The organization's annual St. Catherine of Siena Distinguished Layperson Award was given to two people: theologian Phyllis Zagano, a professor at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., and a regular *NCR* columnist whose books on spirituality and women in the church, especially her writings on women deacons in the church, have won numerous awards; and retired Fordham University history professor Joseph O'Callaghan, a founding member and longtime leader of the Voice of the Faithful affiliate in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn.

Morgan, who flew in from Dublin for the conference, described in detail how the Irish and U.S. experiences of the clergy sexual abuse scandal compare and are different as well as the similarities and differences between the responses in the U.S. and in Ireland, where his board oversees the abuse response of dioceses and religious orders in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

"It is in the audit area that I see key distinguishing features," he said.

"Your audit process in the U.S. is document-based," he said. In annual audits of how well U.S. dioceses are living up the norms and standards of the bishops' 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, those conducting the audits rely on the dioceses to provide documentation of what has occurred in the past year. The self-reported documentation is studied to determine if the diocese is in compliance with the charter.

"A document-based-only audit or review would not be acceptable in Ireland," Morgan said. Four separate public inquiries by civil authorities into sexual abuse cover-ups in Irish Catholic institutions -- the Ferns Report in

2005, the Ryan Report and Murphy Report in 2009 and the Cloyne Report in 2011 -- "so destroyed the credibility of the institutional dimension of the church that nothing less than a full examination of all files under the control of the bishop or congregational leader [of a religious order or missionary institute] dealing in any way with child abuse was warranted. ... Nothing less would suffice for survivors of abuse, for priests and for lay faithful."

Connell, the Wisconsin canon lawyer, also challenged the completeness and transparency of current U.S. diocesan audits that are given to the U.S. National Review Board, the U.S. independent church organization roughly comparable to, but weaker than, the national board in Ireland.

Connell listed several obstacles to transparency in the U.S. church, starting at the top with the oath all cardinals must take when they receive the red hat.

The oath says in part, "I ... promise and swear, from this day forth and as long as I live ... not to make known to anyone matters entrusted to me in confidence, the disclosure of which could bring damage or dishonor to the holy church."

"Surely this oath contributes to the crisis," Connell said. "In other words, if the cardinals promise to be silent, and if other bishops follow their example, can truth and justice ever be served? Can this crisis ever be solved?"

SNAP leader Clohessy drew some hearty laughs at his talk Saturday afternoon by doing a skit similar to Clint Eastwood's at the Republican National Convention. Clohessy set up two empty chairs on stage alongside his lectern and engaged in an imaginary dialogue between two bishops congratulating each other on how well their public relations efforts had worked since 2002.

"A priest was sued for molesting a boy," he told the audience, asking them to guess whether the story was current or from 2002. "It was the second lawsuit against the priest; the first was settled for a substantial amount of money. But Miami's archbishop says the priest has passed a polygraph test, so he's going to keep this priest in ministry. Then or now?"

The audience correctly answered "now." The new lawsuit, filed in early September against Fr. Rolando Garcia of Miami, states the Miami archdiocese had knowledge of a third allegation of abuse, never settled or brought to trial, against the priest.

Clohessy argued that after significant improvements over their previous record in 2002-03, the response of the U.S. bishops has in recent years started to decline, though the overall situation has grown better.

"How can I stand here and say ... you all are wonderful, you're making great strides, you're achieving a lot, and yet it's getting worse?" he asked.

"While the church hierarchy is in many ways getting worse," he said, "thankfully, largely because of your efforts, there is progress in every other realm. It's a little easier for kids to tell [when they've been abused], the parents are more apt to believe them, the families are more apt to call the police, the police are more inclined to take it seriously, the prosecutors are more inclined to prosecute, judges and juries and lawmakers, on and on -- so in the secular world, in the non-church-hierarchy world, there is massive improvement."

The conference also featured a lunchtime preview Saturday of a two-hour HBO special on clergy sexual abuse in the church and its cover-up titled "Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God" and a meditation room just off the main conference ballroom, where participants were invited to take a break anytime to pause and pray or meditate.

The dimly lit meditation room was bare and sparsely furnished, with two or three chairs around each of the half-dozen small round tables, each lit by three candles. The room also had a Lamentation Wall on which those who stopped in were invited to post reflections after prayer and meditation.

Among several dozen notes posted on the wall, one said simply, "I weep for our young people who seek direction."

"Women, too, are victims of abuse by priests," said another.

A third: "We are here for the victims and survivors. Let us never forget that."

The notes from the Lamentation Wall were presented at the Mass and closing liturgy concluding the conference.

Shortly before the 10th anniversary gathering ended, Mullaney told *NCR* the speakers, issues and themes the group addressed could not have meshed more perfectly with "our goals and strategic action plan" for the next decade.

He said the reform group's official estimate of more than 30,000 members is conservative -- their actual count might be closer to 40,000, including members in all 50 states, an affiliate chapter in Ireland and members in about 20 other countries, including Australia and New Zealand.

Although the organization has not been engaged in a membership drive, Mullaney said it has continued to grow by an average of about 50 members a month. Through a coming Web redesign and a greater outreach for "virtual membership" via the Internet, the group hopes to increase its impact and membership base in coming years.

Despite 10 years of frustration and lack of substantive response from the U.S. bishops, "the passion and fire isn't any cooler," he said.

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Anne Burke's speech at the Voice of the Faithful gathering [1]

Joseph O'Callaghan's speech to Voice of the Faithful [2]

Phyllis Zagano's speech to the Voice of the Faithful gathering [3]

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