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Voice of the Faithful critically low on funds

by Tom Roberts



Voice of the Faithful sponsored a Mass for healing for all Catholics and those sexually abused by clergy at St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, Mass., April 26, 2002. (CNS photo)

Voice of the Faithful, the reform and advocacy group that emerged in 2002 in the wake of the clerical sex abuse revelations in Boston, has announced that it may be forced to close its national offices unless it receives a quick infusion of cash.

In an e-mail sent to members and media representatives, the organization said it was "at the crossroads of financial survival" and is looking to raise at least \$60,000 by the end of July in order to continue operations. The amount represents two months of operating expenses, said Bill Casey, chairman of the board of directors.

The organization blames its financial crisis on the larger financial downturn. "As we know all too well, that downturn has rippled into communities and households, confirming worst expectations and fears."

In a July 14 phone interview, Casey said that about \$10,000 had been donated since the announcement

went out the day before. "But I don't think we're going to know until maybe later this week how realistic it is to raise the \$60,000."

Guaranteeing two months of operation, he said, would allow the organization the time to roll out a new strategic plan that has been in the works for several months. The hope is that "by issuing the strategic plan as our blueprint for going forward, that that in itself will generate the enthusiasm and the revenue that will keep us going on a sustained basis."

Work done so far on the strategic plan suggests that the organization's troubles go beyond finance. A "Strategic Plan Narrative" posted on its Web site contains this self-assessment:

"Despite a large, very talented membership, our inability to clearly define ourselves and our "brand" has limited our ability to create sufficient motivation to facilitate meaningful change. This has resulted in general apathy and discontent among leadership, which also hinders our fundraising ability."

The solution, according to the narrative, is to revamp the organization so that it can focus on more concrete projects and actions that also would more greatly involve grassroots members and affiliates.

Sociologist William D'Antonio, a fellow of the Life Cycle Institute at The Catholic University of America in Washington who did a two-year study with Sulpician Fr. Anthony Pogorelc of VOTF membership, said the organization had already survived, at seven years, two years longer than most social movements.

He said in a phone interview that the issue of defining the organization and its mission has been a concern from the beginning. "They lived under the illusion that somehow if they behaved themselves, the bishops would talk to them, but anybody who seemed to know what was going on felt that the bishops were not likely to talk to them. They were never able to develop a procedure for dialoguing effectively with the bishops. There are some bishops who have treated them well, but there was no overall movement by the bishops to say, "Here's an opportunity to talk with people who really want to help us.""

D'Antonio's study showed the VOTF membership to be highly educated, deeply committed to the church though critical of some clerical and hierarchical elements, and financially well off.

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Some of the confusion over defining the organization's purpose occurred after the enormous national attention to the clerical sex abuse crisis began to abate. The organization was initially founded to support abuse victims as well as "priests of integrity" and to seek reforms in church structure that would bring about greater accountability on the part of bishops and diocesan structures.

Almost immediately, some bishops began repudiating the organization and some have not allowed VOTF to hold functions in church-owned facilities.

David Clohessy, one of the founders of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, issued a statement in support of the organization's appeal.

"Millions of Catholics are grateful that clergy sex crimes and cover ups are finally being exposed. We hope they'll step up to the plate and support this pioneering organization that works so hard to make the church a safer, healthier place," he said.

Clohessy warned that "an unchecked, all-powerful Catholic hierarchy is dangerous. Like politicians, bishops need checks and balances to thwart or at least reduce arrogance, callousness and recklessness. That's what VOTF steadfastly provides and what the church desperately needs."

Even in the worst case scenario, in which VOTF does not raise the needed funds and is unable to sustain a national office, the organization "will not disappear," said Casey, who is retired from the Bureau of the Treasury and lives in northern Virginia. He said VOTF would continue with "a largely volunteer leadership, and the real work would be done as it is done now anyway, by individuals and affiliate organizations."

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