

## Voice of the Faithful offers path for input into Synod on Synodality

Roman Catholics worldwide are embarked on a two-year journey (2021-2023) called “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” This Synod on Synodality provides the most significant opportunity ever for the Church’s laity to influence the future of the Church.

According to Pope Francis, synodality is the way of being the Church today, in a dynamic of discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Appropriately for an organization whose mission calls for Spirit-led voices participating in the Church’s governance and guidance, the international lay organization Voice of the Faithful has taken up Pope Francis’ call for input from all the People of God into this Synod on Synodality.

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## *Keep the Faith, Change the Church*

VOTF marks 20 years of service to the Church *By VOTF President Mary Pat Fox*



Voice of the Faithful has been working to do just that – Keep the Faith and Change the Church – for 20 years. Change takes a long time, and changing a 2,000-year-old organization takes a

lot of perseverance! In *Pacem in Terris*, Pope St. John XXIII said: “To proceed gradually is the law of life in all its expressions; therefore, in human institutions, too, it is not possible to renovate for the better except by working from within them, gradually,” which is what Voice of the Faithful seeks to do in all of its activities.

VOTF began as a small group of concerned Catholics in the basement of St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and quickly grew to comprise more members than could possibly fit in the church basement. The founders must have known that the change needed to stop the abuse, and to ensure that it would never happen again, would take a long time because the structure of our mission statement and three goals are still on point for what needs to be done, 20 years later.

We began with outrage focused on hearing survivors’ stories and on alerting and educating Catholics to the reality of the abuse crisis, which continues even today. Child sex abuse came at the hands of priests, some of whom we knew and

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## VOTF offers Synod path ... *(Continued from Page 1)*

After developing its own model, VOTF has been holding Synod sessions since January. They will continue through June. These Synod sessions are opportunities for people to express how they see the Church becoming the synodal, pastoral, evangelical Church it should be. The combined views resulting from these sessions will be forwarded to the General Secretariat for the Synod in Rome.

In addition to gathering the views of its own members, VOTF Synod sessions are open to all who want to attend. The organization also is helping any groups seeking assistance with their own sessions.

“Synod” comes from Greek and indicates the path along which the People of God walk together; how Christians originally were called “followers of the Way (of Jesus).”

This past September, while addressing about a thousand representatives of the Diocese of Rome, including bishops, clergy, women and men religious, and members of the laity, Pope Francis said the synodal process involves “a dynamism of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church, involving the whole People of God.”\*

The Synod on Synodality has three phases. The first phase, called the diocesan phase, began October 2021 and concludes in August 2022. During this phase, input from all the faithful will be collected and sent to local bishops or directly to the Vatican. Many dioceses, local groups, and organizations have begun this process.

## *Keep the Faith, Change the Church*

### Voice of the Faithful marks 20 years of service to the Church

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trusted. Abusers do not resemble monsters. They look like ordinary people, hiding in plain sight.

Over the years, we have developed many resources, programs, projects, and initiatives to fulfill our mission and goals. These can be seen on VOTF’s website, [votf.org](http://votf.org), along with other activities, like our conferences, that have kept our focus on *Keeping the Faith and Changing the Church*.

Fast forward 20 years to today, and you will see that much change – despite the Church’s preference for glacial movement – has taken place during those two decades. In accountability, for example, VOTF has completed our fifth annual diocesan financial transparency and accountability report and will soon release our first online reviews of lay in-

VOTF first held a Synod session as a trial run the evening before its 2021 national conference last October. Attendees from the United States, Canada, and New Zealand discussed their dreams for a Church that recognizes the Spirit-led voices of all the faithful, both lay and ordained.

Before the general assembly of the Synod of Bishops meets in Rome in October 2023, Catholics everywhere will have recalled “how the Spirit has guided the Church’s journey through history and, today, guides us to be, together, witnesses of God’s love; living a participative and inclusive ecclesial process that offers everyone—especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margin—the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God.”\*

Dates and times for VOTF’s Synod sessions are announced by e-mail to members and on its website, [votf.org](http://votf.org). VOTF emphasizes that all voices will be heard for the Synod, even the voices of those who feel uncomfortable talking in a group about their experiences and hopes for the future of the Church. Anyone who would like additional information may e-mail [office@votf.org](mailto:office@votf.org).

Voice of the Faithful maintains a continually updated webpage, “Listening to the Faithful: Preparing for the Synod 2021-2023,” for Synod information and resources.

*\*From the Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops – For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*

volvement in Church governance and on adherence to child protection guidelines in the dioceses.

Presently, we are holding Synod sessions in response to Pope Francis’s call for us to journey together in a Synod on Synodality. All are invited to participate in VOTF’s Synod sessions. The information gathered will be submitted to Rome, according to guidelines for Lay Apostolates of the Catholic Church, as VOTF is recognized.

You will hear more about these and our other activities in our e-newsletter, *In the Vineyard*, as part of our series of stories marking 2022 as VOTF’s 20th year in service to the Church.

*We thank you for your continued support.*

# My experience at a VOTF Synod session *By Michaela Carroll*



*This article was first published in the Jan. 31, 2022, issue of Voice of the Faithful's "In the Vineyard" twice-monthly e-newsletter. You can sign up to receive the e-newsletter at votf.org. Look for the link on the right side of the homepage.*

Listening sessions as part of the Synod on Synodality have begun across the country, and VOTF is conducting sessions as well. I had the privilege of attending and serving as scribe to a Session 1 meeting this past week (Jan. 25), and wanted to share my observations.

The first question we discussed was: "Guided by the Holy Spirit, what for me is most meaningful about belonging to a local faith community? What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of? What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?"

In our small group, many had similar feelings and experiences. A caring, responsive, and engaged community added value and meaning to belonging to a local faith community. For some, the local faith community that was most valuable was the local VOTF chapter or other alternative faith communities outside of traditional parishes. Sharing beliefs, actions, and hopes allows individuals to grow and be known in their faith communities.

Among the most fervent dreams for the Church at the local level were striving to live the values of a Christ-like life, to emphasize growth in personal relationships with Christ, and to harness the power of women and women's groups for the good of the local Church.

One participant in the session I attended shared a story of how her parish's women's group came to her aid after she was injured in a fall at the end of last year. The myriad talents and strengths of the individuals in a parish, particularly those of women parishioners, are being passed over by church hierarchy, to the detriment of the parish community.

Participants also discussed a desire for social justice actions to be a part of the local faith community, particularly in collaboration with other faith groups.

Another way in which participants yearn for more community is through parish councils. One participant discussed how the collaborative to which she belonged had not had a parish council for several years, and how the lack of a parish council had led to a mismatch between the parish's programming and the needs of the parish community.

The biggest frustrations were with the inability of lay faithful to be involved in controlling boards (i.e., diocesan finance councils), the cloistered environment in which priests are formed, the lack of transparency and accountability, and the lack of commitment to social justice. We discussed how priests are formed in cloistered environments that focus solely on spiritual development, while their ultimate role is deeply embedded in the community. At the local level, seminaries should be more involved with their local parishes and communities.

Participants mentioned that, while VOTF is doing wonderful work bringing the church forward in accountability and transparency, local churches need to renew their commitment to these ideals. Finally, while local parishes have many opportunities to be involved in local events, we are frustrated with their lack of action in the face of local and systemic injustices when these are all opportunities to live like Christ.

The second question for this session was, "For me, what is most meaningful about being part of the universal Church? What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of? What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?"

These responses were similar to the discussions concerning local parishes, with a few notable exceptions. We found that being part of a larger universal church offered a sense of belonging and community, no matter where we go. We dreamed of a universal church with voluntary celibacy, more women's involvement and leadership, and women's ordination, and more respect for what Pope Francis says and does.

We are frustrated with the lack of women in leadership roles and wish for a critical mass of women in the College of Cardinals to act as a check on power and allow women to command more respect. We find it frustrating that diocesan finance councils have not always followed Canon law and that they are always white, aristocratic wealthy men.

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## My experience at a VOTF Synod session *(Continued from Page 3)*

Women have been ignored and disregarded when they tried to contribute. Diocesan finance councils are the only boards with any actual power, but they are always made up of the same types of people, and always have so much deference to the Bishop that they are advisory in name only. We wish that the governance issues would be addressed and allow for lay people to have some control to make things happen.

We are frustrated with the intense clericism innate to the way priests are trained and evident in their actions, and we wish for seminaries to be integrated into communities. Finally, we are frustrated with the lack of movement

on vital issues facing our communities: the sexual abuse crisis and the social justice issues affecting our most vulnerable, for example. We feel there must be collaborative efforts to effect change. Pope Francis has spoken at length of the need for action, and while some individual parishes act on his preaching, the majority does nothing.

This session was truly wonderful and I am grateful I had the chance to be involved. VOTF is continuing to hold sessions for the Synod through June 2022, and I recommend everyone take advantage of this opportunity to listen to and with your VOTF community.

## 20 Years after “Spotlight,” is the Church safe?

Voice of the Faithful maintains a Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/voiceofthefaithful](http://www.facebook.com/voiceofthefaithful)), and we can see by our Likes and Comments that clergy sexual abuse remains a grievous wound in our Church, even 20 years after VOTF was founded, soon after *The Boston Globe's* stories horrified Catholics in the Boston Archdiocese with revelations of widespread clergy sexual abuse of minors and how the hierarchy had allowed, abetted, and kept it secret for decades.

The scale of the abuse is difficult to comprehend, despite the Church's attempts to minimize the scandal. Statistics from just the past five years offer some indication of its extent:

- In 2017, an Australian Royal Commission reported the Catholic Church received four times the number of allegations associated with any other religious group—4,444 allegations, 1,880 abusers, 1980 to 2015.
- In 2018, a report commissioned by the German Bishops' Conference found clergy had abused at least 3,677 victims between 1946 and 2014.
- In 2018, a Pennsylvania grand jury disclosed that 300 priests had been accused of child sexual abuse of more than 1,000 victims over the previous seven decades.
- The U.S. Bishop's Conference audit for 2020 showed 4,250 allegations of clergy sexual abuse of minors had been reported in the year ending June 30, 2020.
- In October 2021, an independent commission of the French Catholic Church reported that as many as

330,000 children had been victims of sexual abuse by 2,900 to 3,200 abusers over the past 70 years.

- In January 2022, a two-year investigation commissioned by the Archdiocese of Munich reported 497 allegations and 235 abusers, including former Pope Benedict XVI when he was archbishop of Munich and Freising.
- On Feb. 1, 2022, New Zealand's Catholic Church said that a two-year investigation had revealed that 14% of its clergy had been accused of abuse—1,680 allegations by 1,122 individuals since 1950.

Space permitting, we could list many, many more examples. During the last two decades, VOTF has continually sought to hold the Church accountable, using: annual online reviews of diocesan financial transparency, adherence to child protection guidelines, and lay involvement in Church governance; BridgeDialogues™ to end clericalism; proposal for Catholic married men to be ordained priests; promotion of equality for women; Broken Vessel™ Healing Circles to support all affected by clergy abuse; lay education; Synod of Synodality input sessions; and much more. See [votf.org](http://votf.org).

VOTF's resources, programs, and projects are needed more than ever. Please support us with your generous financial contribution. Donate at [votf.org](http://votf.org) or use the enclosed bucksliip.

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*Keep the Faith, Change the Church*

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Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide organization of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. We support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and work to help shape structural change in the Church.

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