

December 14, 2002

## **Voice of the Faithful**

*The Value of a Catholic Education*

**by James E Post**

Dr. Robert J. Wickenheiser, President  
St. Bonaventure University  
St. Bonaventure, New York 14778

Dear Bob:

You have surely been asked the question, "Does a Catholic education really matter?"

I want to testify that the answer is "yes". Moreover, I believe that Catholic education at St. Bonaventure University makes a difference in ways that may not be grasped until years later.

The Franciscan values of peace, love, joy, contemplation, respect for each person, and compassionate service to others are modeled in innumerable ways by the Friars and lay men and women who form the St. Bonaventure community. By living their espoused values, these people engage in acts, large and small, that form lasting memories for students and their families.

I recently began a chapter of my life that has been profoundly shaped by Franciscan values and my experience at St. Bonaventure University many years ago.

### **The Crisis**

The clergy sexual abuse scandal exploded on the front page of newspapers in Boston and the nation in January 2002. The disclosures were staggering, leading to widespread questioning of leadership. The cover up of crimes of sexual assault was inexplicable. The crisis also became a powerful catalyst leading thousands to reexamine their Catholic faith and values. We asked, "What must I do?" Little did I know that a new chapter of my faith journey was about to begin.

Parishioners began meeting and listening to the stories of survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Outreach to survivors was not easy. Their betrayal by abusive priests and bishops, who too often ignored them, left deep psychological and emotional wounds. We formed "Voice of the Faithful" and began to work for change to ensure such horrors ended. We saw that priests were also suffering; no priest was free of suspicion. We demonstrated our support for those priests who were faithfully living their vows. And, through our work, we recognized the need for meaningful laity involvement in the governance and guidance of the Church.

### **Voice of the Faithful**

Voice of the Faithful is an extraordinary movement. We had a few hundred members in

February. That number rose to 5,000 in May and to 19,000 by July when VOTF held its first convention for more than 4,200 attendees. Today, less than one year since it started, 25,000 people from the United States and twenty-one other nations are engaged in what Newsweek magazine has named one of the most significant events of 2002. (The story will appear in a special end-of-year issue.)

The anger and outrage that moved thousands of Catholics to get out of their chairs and into their churches to listen and talk, to protest and pray, became a positive force. Peace, love, and compassion have moved people to Voice of the Faithful. Franciscan values matter; the clergy sexual abuse scandal demonstrates how Franciscan values are turned into action in the world.

I am a co-founder of Voice of the Faithful and have been President since June 2002. Franciscan values guide me every day. I have reflected on how my teachers from many years ago -each one a role model- would have viewed these events. I believe they would embrace the Catholic laity movement embodied in Voice of the Faithful. Having graduated in 1965, I recall my teachers closely following the Vatican II Council in Rome. Many theologians now say that Voice of the Faithful is the active laity presence contemplated by Vatican II.

### **The Road Ahead**

American bishops recently approved a Charter and Norms to ensure that children will be safe from sexual abuse. The challenge is to turn this policy language into meaningful action. To do so, bishops, priests, survivors and the Catholic laity must work together. This will not be easy, however. Some bishops fear laity activism; a few have even banned Voice of the Faithful from using church facilities for meetings in their dioceses. They fear a dissident movement that might threaten the unity of the Church. We, on the other hand, fear foot-dragging and ineffective implementation efforts by some bishops.

In late November, I met with Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, whose actions set off the current crisis. The national media carried news of this meeting. We discussed the state of the crisis, the response of the laity, and the objectives of Voice of the Faithful. It was a very difficult conversation, as candid conversations must be. Yesterday, Pope John Paul II accepted Cardinal Law's resignation as Archbishop of Boston.

The Archdiocese of Boston faces the risk of financial bankruptcy. This complicates our efforts to achieve justice for survivors and to preserve a Church that meets pressing community needs. The role of the Catholic laity has never been more important to the future of the Church.

Faithful Catholics are guided by Catholic teaching and by the lessons learned as we turn values into practice. Franciscan values emphasize our need, as baptized Catholics, to nurture the relationships that are God's great work. We are compassionate. We do love one another. We must insist on change. We must be "channels of peace" celebrated in the Prayer of St. Francis.

When the next prospective student, parent, or friend asks "Does a Catholic education really matter?," I hope you will say, "Yes!" and share this story of a faith journey that began at St. Bonaventure University many years ago. Catholic education is education for life. Franciscan

education is education for a life that will make a difference - whenever that time arrives.

Sincerely,

James E. Post  
President, Voice of the Faithful