

Catholic World Report

November 2009



Special Report

Dissenters, now calling themselves the American Catholic Council, plan a 2011 conference in Detroit “to create a new Church.”

By Anne Hendershott



Claiming that they are attempting to address the “serious deterioration of the US Church today,” organizers of a new Catholic reform organization are planning a national conclave in 2011 called the American Catholic Council. In what is being billed as a kind of off-site Vatican Council, the proposed gathering promises “thoughtful discussion” of scholarly papers and presentations by Catholic theologians, scholars, and activists—all directed toward the goal of creating a new Church that is “fully in tune with the authentic Gospel message.”

Promising that the American Catholic Council will “recapture the universal call to ministry,” organizers claim to have launched the call for the national council in an effort to create a more responsive, accountable Church that “calls on the active participation of its people and more closely models the American experience.”

Although council leaders have denied that they are attempting to create their own church, the [American Catholic Council website](#) states their mission clearly: “We seek nothing short of a personal conversion of all to create a new Church.” And, while the organizers of the proposed council have appropriated the language and trappings of an authentic Catholic council, the reality is that the American Catholic Council will be conducted entirely outside the purview of the Church, flouting canon law, and ignoring input from current Church leaders.

Commemorating the 50th anniversary of what organizers view as the “unfulfilled promise” of the Second Vatican Council, the American Catholic Council is scheduled to be held in Detroit in the fall of 2011. Detroit was selected because it was the site of the 1976 Call to Action Conference—a conference that Joseph Bottum, editor of *First Things*, [has described](#) as the “low point in post-Vatican II American

Catholic unity.” Bottum recalled that the 1976 conference began by calling upon the Church to fight “chronic racism, sexism, militarism, and poverty in modern society.” But, by the conclusion of the conference, Call to Action participants demanded that the Church change its positions on celibacy, male clergy, homosexuality, birth control, and Communion for the divorced and remarried—with further decisions to be made by majority votes of laypeople.

Mirroring the goals of the 1976 conference, the American Catholic Council is designed to “actualize the reforms of Vatican II for the United States Church.” On their homepage, the American Catholic Council describes itself as “a coalition of organizations, communities, and individuals calling for discussion at every level of the Catholic Church in the United States to consider the state and future of our Church.” All of the organizations and individuals involved are affiliated or allied with change-oriented organizations. Several of them have been officially censured by their bishops for misleading the faithful on key doctrinal issues.



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The two co-chairs of the American Catholic Council, Janet Hauter and John Hushon, are part of the leadership of [Voice of the Faithful](#) (VOTF), a Catholic dissident organization that was created in 2002 to address the clergy abuse scandal but has since broadened its focus to demand structural changes in the Church. Hauter is currently the national vice-president of VOTF, and Hushon has served as a trustee on the VOTF board. Like VOTF, most of the organizations listed as endorsing the Declaration of the Council are well-known Catholic reform organizations, each with its own demands that the Church change its stance on a variety of issues, including reproductive rights, priestly celibacy, women’s ordination, homosexuality, and lay control of parish finances and governance.

Formal endorsers of the council include the [Women’s Ordination Conference](#), [DignityUSA](#), [New Ways Ministry](#), [Corpus](#), [FutureChurch](#), Americans for Rights in the Catholic Church, [Call to Action](#), Take Back Our Church, [Catholic Diocese of One Spirit](#), [Women-Church Convergence](#), the National Association of American Nuns, [Pax Christi](#), [We Are Church](#), the European Network, [Elephants in the Living Room](#), [Sacred Quest](#), Benedictine Monastery of the Holy Spirit, and the [Society of Blessed John XXIII](#).

Individual endorsers include Joseph O’Callaghan and Joanne Blair of Voice of the Faithful, Thomas Brooks of [Celibacy is the Issue](#), John Bammer of [Spirited Lay Action Movement](#), John Kinkel of Oakland University, and Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University professor and VOTF member. William Mullins, Margaret Mary Moore, and Frank McGrath provided signatures but did not list their affiliations.

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL TAKES THE LEAD

Leaders and many of the members of Voice of the Faithful are helping to launch the American Catholic Council. Earlier this year VOTF members were tied to an attempt by lawmakers in the state of Connecticut to pass a bill that would remove much of the governing role of the bishops within the state. And although we cannot say that VOTF helped to write the legislation, much of the language in the bill mirrored that of the [VOTF Bridgeport, Connecticut chapter’s](#) published demands. Since its founding,

the goal of VOTF has been “meaningful change in the Church.” Encouraging “systematic transformation and growth in the universal Church,” spokespersons from VOTF and the American Catholic Council lament what they view as the failed promise of Vatican II—and both claim that the “universal call to ministry” has not yet been fulfilled.

Although the VOTF slogan, “Change the Church, Not the Faith,” suggests faithfulness, survey data collected from 1, 273 VOTF leaders and members call that claim into question. A study of the history, religious beliefs, practices, and attitudes of the members of VOTF, published in 2007 by sociologists William D’Antonio and Anthony Pogorelc, reveals that many of the VOTF members hold negative opinions about the Church and her leaders that go well beyond concerns about the sexual abuse of minors.

D’Antonio and Pogorelc’s research demonstrates that the reason there is such a close affinity between the American Catholic Council, VOTF, and Call to Action is because VOTF members are spearheading the American Catholic Council movement, and 22 percent of the polled members of VOTF are also members of Call to Action. Like Call to Action members, VOTF members are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward the Church. Survey data reveal that 85 percent of VOTF members strongly agreed that the “hierarchy is out of touch,” and while the VOTF mission statement claims to “support priests of integrity,” only 18 percent of VOTF members claim that “priests do a good job.” Sixty-six percent of VOTF members believe that members should withhold contributions to the Church and 98 percent believe that the laity should oversee parish finances and spending. While VOTF members claim to want more involvement in Church financial governance, only 21 percent of all VOTF members have ever served on a parish finance council.

It should be noted that more than half of the VOTF membership indicate that they attended Catholic colleges. In their conclusions, D’Antonio and Pogorelc note that many of them “came into their progressive tendencies while attending Catholic colleges.” VOTF members claim to be committed to the Catholic Church, but only 50 percent of VOTF members indicate that they would “never leave” the Church itself. Presumably the other 50 percent are considering leaving the Church—unless they are able to succeed in their demands.

Not surprisingly, the VOTF founders and current leaders are especially committed to coercing change within the Church and her leadership. And as some of them have demonstrated in Connecticut, they are not beyond employing the state as a partner in demanding that the Church change.

Many of the leaders have a history of contributing to similar types of social movements. James Muller, a cardiologist and the founding president of VOTF, has experience in political organizing, including what D’Antonio and Pogorelc call a “sojourn to Moscow in the 1970s that paved the way for the formation of International Physicians against Nuclear War.” For Muller, VOTF was just the latest of his political endeavors. Jim Post, Muller’s successor as president, shares a similar commitment to political causes. In the late 1970s, Post became active in what was then called the “infant formula scandal.” Post worked with the World Health Organization and later with the Nestle Infant Formula Product Commission to monitor Nestle’s compliance with the international code.

CHANGE STRUCTURE, CHANGE DOCTRINE

Despite claims that those promoting the American Catholic Council only want to change the structure of the Church, most sociologists know that it is impossible to separate structure from doctrine. Even a supporter of the reform movement, Yale sociologist Michelle Dillon, wrote in her review of the VOTF survey data compiled by D’Antonio and Pogorelc that “it is sociologically and theologically naïve to assume that doctrine and structure, or culture and structure, are separate domains.” Mary Hines,

Emmanuel College theologian, echoes Dillon's sentiments, claiming that "when you divorce structure from mission and doctrine the result is ecclesologically deficient and risks absolutizing the institutional." For many of the supporters of the American Catholic Council, the overt goal of changing the structure of the Church is simply a first step in the real goal of changing Church doctrine on a host of issues.

Indeed, the impossibility of separating structure from doctrine is especially evident in the statements made by American Catholic Council endorser Anthony Padovano, a former priest and president emeritus of CORPUS (Corps of Retired Priests United for Service), an advocacy group for married priests. While Padovano is critical of the celibacy requirement for priests, his public dissent goes beyond the priesthood and into doctrinal disagreements over the concept of original sin, the virginal conception of Jesus, the resurrection, women's ordination, and abortion.

In 2008, after a visit to an abortion clinic with other members of Catholics for Choice's European advisory group, Padovano published a "theological reflection" on the need for abortion in Conscience, the Catholics for Choice newsletter. Padovano writes that "there are many ways of being Catholic," and he maintains that the Church has "for almost all its history and even now had sound theological and moral reasons for accepting abortion at any stage as the lesser of evils." In his article, Padovano approvingly recalls that "at the [abortion] clinic we visited, some staff and nurses are committed Catholics. They see what they do as a moral choice, in accord with their conscience. They are convinced they bring women healing and hope."

Padovano joins Fairfield University Professor Paul Lakeland, another former priest, in providing support and signatures for the Declaration of the American Catholic Council. Earlier this year, Lakeland became the media spokesperson in favor of the attempted state legislative takeover of the Connecticut Catholic Church. Lakeland's books and speeches promise to "help our sisters and brothers exercise their baptismal priesthood" by erasing the distinction between the ordained and the laity. Claiming that he wants to create an "adult Church" by "ending the structural oppression of the laity," Lakeland has made it clear in his writing and speeches that he believes that the celebration of the Eucharist need not be limited to the ordained ministry.

"SYNODS OF THE BAPTIZED"

To prepare the faithful for the American Catholic Council, organizers have encouraged local organizations to hold regional meetings prior to the 2011 Detroit conclave. VOTF leaders and members like Janet Hauter and Paul Lakeland are playing important roles in rallying the troops throughout the country. Earlier this year, Hauter was the keynote speaker at the April 18 Prayer Breakfast of the Twin Cities-based [Catholic Coalition for Church Reform](#). The primary purpose of the event was to announce and plan a series of "Synods of the Baptized," scheduled to take place within the local Church over the next few years. According to one attendee, "The Prayer Breakfast began with a liturgy entitled *Many Voices, One Church*, which focused on claiming the incomparable powers and unshackled grace of baptism as together as Catholics we faithfully respond to the need for reform in the Church."

Hauter opened her Prayer Breakfast speech by saying, "What's exciting for me is that this newly founded coalition in the Twin Cities is working on the same reform agenda as Voice of the Faithful, Call to Action, and the American Catholic Council." For Hauter, "this is a sign that the Spirit is engineering the movement of Church reform in our time."

Lakeland is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at the first in a series of "Synods of the Baptized" in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Appropriating the language of the Church by calling it a synod, the Twin Cities-based coalition has invited members to be a part of one or more "work/study groups," which will

address how to reform certain areas of Church life prior to the first of the series of synods. According to the organizers, the areas in need of reform include “clericalism, the selection of bishops, official teaching on sexuality and gender, and Church authority and governance.” The synod is to be preceded by a fundraising dinner featuring Father Roy Bourgeois of [School of the Americas Watch](#).

While the planning activities surrounding the American Catholic Council have met little resistance so far, Archbishop John Nienstedt of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has issued a statement: “The archdiocese wishes to lovingly caution those members of the faithful participating in the work/study groups, and intending to attend the synod, of the potential that the issues on which CCCR will seek reform are magisterial teachings of the Church, and are therefore to be believed by divine and Catholic faith.”

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