



April 4, 2008

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI
Apostolic Palace
Vatican City

Dear Pope Benedict,

We are very pleased that you will be visiting the United States, and we take the opportunity of your visit to introduce ourselves and our work.

While we remain hopeful about our future, we have great concerns about the current condition of our beloved Church.

Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) is a worldwide movement of concerned, mainstream Catholics formed in 2002 in response to the clergy sexual abuse crisis. Our Mission is to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. Our goals are to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and shape structural change within the Church.

Mindful of the many serious challenges facing our Church today, yet hopeful of a better tomorrow, VOTF's 35,000 members seek the transformation of our Church. We envision a Church that is open, transparent, and accountable. We imagine a Church that embraces the gifts and talents of the laity. We dream of a Church governed by compassion, informed by justice, empowered by equality, and animated to act collegially.

As head of the Universal Church, we invite you to lead this transformation.

Most Catholics know too well the human suffering and financial costs associated with the global clergy sexual abuse crisis. In the United States alone, more than 4,300 priests were alleged to have abused almost 11,000 young people between the years 1950 and 2002. Legal settlements by American dioceses amounted to \$615 million in 2007, and now exceed \$2.3 billion overall. Catholic dioceses have filed for bankruptcy in Alaska, Arizona, California, Iowa, Oregon and Washington. Equally troubling is the fact that some of our Bishops contributed to this terrible toll.

Many loyal Catholics are asking how our Church can be a moral beacon when so many Bishops who repeatedly transferred known abusers remain in office? We believe that without justice for the abused and accountability from Bishops, this crisis will continue to plague our Church.

Our Church faces many other serious challenges as well. The declining number of clergy jeopardizes the availability of Eucharist. The laity continue to be excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making. Catholics—particularly the young—are leaving our Church to join other religions, or no religion at all. The hopeful vision of Vatican II remains largely unfulfilled, and deep polarization exists in our church about how best to fulfill our sacred mission.

We are calling on all Catholics to work towards a lasting, transformed Body of Christ that serves all people with compassion, collegiality and cooperation. We believe in collaboration among all members of our Church in order to achieve this transformation.

Please begin to treat survivors with justice and compassion. We believe you and all of our Bishops should meet with survivors, listen to their stories, and treat them with respect and compassion. Show them and the world that you recognize the grave harm our Church has done and that you are committed to having our church become a source of healing for these individuals.

We ask you to make all Bishops accountable to the people they serve. To start, please ask for the resignations of those Bishops who repeatedly reassigned abusive priests.

Please tell Bishops to stop blocking settlements, to initiate truly independent annual audits and to support revising the laws that govern statutes of limitations which today can serve to block prosecution of known child abusers.

Please make protecting our children a top priority, beginning with creation of national databases of credibly accused priests. We also ask that you make fair investigation and prompt resolution of allegations against priests a high priority.

Please embrace full lay participation in our Church. Catholic laity are prepared to embrace our responsibilities as baptized Catholics. Please instruct Bishops to strongly encourage the laity to become fully involved in the decisions that impact the life of their parishes and dioceses, including parish closings. If you do this, we are convinced that our parishes will grow and our children and grandchildren will become proud, active members of our Church.

Please make full financial transparency and accountability mandatory. All parishes and dioceses should publish complete annual financial statements and have fully engaged, lay-led finance committees that provide independent advice to pastors and Bishops. Please ask the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to change optional financial reporting guidelines to mandatory standards. If you do this, it is likely that theft of parish and diocesan funds would decline and we would be less likely to see surveys indicating that 85% of reporting dioceses have suffered through embezzlements.

Please encourage the noble pursuit of wisdom and truth. Fresh spiritual and theological insights should be openly discussed and evaluated. Please embrace meaningful, positive change in our Church by encouraging forums and other opportunities for Catholics to express and develop their faith and to put their faith into action.

Pope Benedict, please help heal our beloved Church and lead its restoration to the vibrant messenger of the Gospel it was meant to be.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daniel Bartley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Daniel" and last name "Bartley" clearly distinguishable.

Daniel Bartley, President

Voice of the Faithful