When a brand new organization like Voice Of The Faithful (VOTF) springs up and a group of Catholic parishioners wants to hold a meeting in the parish hall to organize a local affiliate, how are we to react? If you are the pastor, or on the parish staff, or a member of the pastoral council, how do you think through the decision to give or deny permission for such a meeting?

Voice Of The Faithful came into existence almost spontaneously in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in January, 2002, just after the Boston Globe began its series of articles on the scandal of clergy sexual abuses. The group met in the school cafeteria of St. John the Evangelist Parish. Its weekly gatherings soon drew 700 persons; in three months time it claimed 6,800 supporters from all over the country and the world. A convention held in Boston in July attracted 4,200 persons. By January, 2003, Voice Of The Faithful had over 25,000 members worldwide with over 100 Parish Voice affiliate groups.

VOTF states as its mission: “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.” Its goals are (1) to support those who have been abused, (2) to support priests of integrity, and (3) to shape structural change within the Church.

Some pastors in Boston and Portland refused to allow VOTF to meet on their parish property. Surprisingly, several bishops also attempted to prevent VOTF from meeting on church premises in their dioceses: Myers in Newark, Murphy in Rockville Centre, Lori in Bridgeport, and Daily in Brooklyn. (In April, 2003, Bishop Daily revoked his earlier ban and left the decision to make parish facilities available for VOTF meetings up to the pastors.)

What should we think and do when confronted with requests to hold meetings on church property? Calling the bishop’s office is always an option. Often the staff persons at the diocesan chancery or pastoral center will know if there is a policy or, if not, they can usually give good advice. But it should not be necessary to consult “a higher authority” for such matters. There is no good reason why the decision should not be made within the parish community.

Consult the Canons

One place to go for guidance in such matters is Canon Law, the Church’s official

James A. Coriden, a priest of the diocese of Gary, Indiana, teaches Canon Law at the Washington Theological Union. He is one of the editors and authors of the two Canon Law Society of America commentaries on the 1983 Code of Canon Law.
rules for its public order. The main source for these rules is the Code of Canon Law, which was enacted by Pope John Paul II in 1983. The Code was formed and shaped by the Second Vatican Council. It is radically different from all previous articulations of Canon Law in that the Christian faithful, and not the clergy, are the protagonists of the Code. The people of the Church are center stage, the primary players. Formerly canonical collections were viewed as handbooks for the guidance of the clergy. Now Canon Law is directed toward all of the members of the Church, laity as well as religious and ordained ministers.

Nowhere is this centrality of the Christian faithful more obvious than in the Code’s chief and largest section, Book II on “The People of God.” It begins with an inclusive and empowering canon that describes who the Christian faithful are:

The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God. For this reason, made sharers in their own way in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and royal function, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each (C. 204).

This description undergirds and validates active lay participation in the governance of the Church, just as it does the people’s active and fruitful participation in the Church’s worship, and their sharing in the proclamation of the word of God by both word and example.

Freedom of Expression

The descriptive definition of the Christian faithful is followed by a canonical innovation: a whole section on “The Obligations and Rights of All the Christian Faithful” (canons 208–23). It is frequently referred to as the canonical “bill of rights.” This is the clearest example of the new orientation of the 1983 Code toward all of the Christian faithful.

Salient among these stated rights of the faithful is freedom of expression:

The Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires.

According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward the sacred pastors, and attentive to the common advantage and the dignity of persons (C. 212, 2 & 3).

The source of this canon is Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium) in its section on the laity, in particular on the relationship between laity and their pastors, a relationship of mutuality and interdependence:

Lay persons are to make known to these pastors their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which befits children of God and sisters and brothers in Christ. In accordance with the knowledge, competence and authority that they possess, they have the right and indeed sometimes the duty to make known their opinion on
matters which concern the good of the Church. If possible this should be done through institutions set up for this purpose by the Church; and it should always be done with respect for the truth, with courage and with prudence, and in a spirit of reverence and love toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent Christ (LG, 37).

Some of the “institutions set up for this purpose by the Church” to facilitate communications are structures like diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils, diocesan synods, and finance councils in parishes and dioceses. The mission and goals of VOTF indicate that it could be another “voice” for the expression of lay needs, desires, and opinions—not only to the ministers of the church, but also “to the rest of the Christian faithful.”

**Freedom of Association**

Another basic right of the Christian faithful stated in this singularly important section of the Code is the right to meet and to form associations:

The Christian faithful are at liberty freely to found and direct associations for purposes of charity or piety or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world and to hold meetings for the common pursuit of these purposes (C. 215).

A closely related right stated in this “bill of rights” is the right to organize, that is, to initiate, promote, and sustain apostolic activities:

Since they participate in the mission of the Church, all the Christian faithful have the right to promote or sustain apostolic action even by their own undertakings, according to their own state and condition. Nevertheless, no undertaking is to claim the name Catholic without the consent of competent ecclesiastical authority (C. 216).

Both of these provisions are derived from the Vatican Council’s Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (AA, 18–21, 24). Both allow for such initiatives as the meetings and organization of Voice Of The Faithful.

**Collaboration**

Further along, the Code of Canon Law details the obligations of pastors of parishes. One of their duties is to recognize and promote the role of lay persons in the Church’s mission (C. 529.2). This canonical obligation is based on an eloquent passage on collaboration between priests and laity in the Council’s Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests:

Reborn like everyone else in the baptismal font, they are brothers among brothers and sisters, members of one and the same body of Christ which all are bidden to foster. Priests . . . should work together with the faithful . . . sincerely acknowledge and promote the standing of the laity and their proper role in the church’s mission. They should fully respect the rightful freedom which belongs to all in human society. They should readily listen to lay persons, considering their wishes as those of sisters and brothers, recognizing their experience and competence in various fields of human activity, so as to join with them in reading the signs of the times. They are to . . . discern with a sense of faith the manifold gifts . . . that the laity have,
acknowledge them gladly and foster them with care (PO, 9).

This collaboration between laity and priests is reinforced by the strong assertion of the Council’s Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

Every one of the faithful has the right and duty to exercise gifts of grace (charisms) in the church and in the world, for the good of humanity and for the building up of the church (AA, 3).

Taken together, these canons of the Code create a strong presumption in favor of such organizational initiatives as Voice Of The Faithful. The canons do not give automatic approval or unlimited warrant to such groups, but they affirm a welcoming attitude and presumption of propriety within the Catholic community for them.

Who Decides?

As to the specific question of meeting on parish property, the canons remind us that ownership of church property belongs to the juridic person that acquired it (C. 1256). This means, for example, that in Canon Law parishes are the owners of the property that they have purchased or otherwise acquired. A parish is defined in terms of a “community of the Christian faithful” (C. 515.1). The pastor of the parish is its representative in juridic affairs (C. 532), and “for that same community he carries out the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing,” but he does so “with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful” (C. 519). The pastoral council of the parish assists the pastor in fostering pastoral activity (C. 532.1).

The inference from the canons is that such decisions about new groups holding meetings on parish property should be made within the parish community by both the pastor and the people. In making the judgments, they should prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If they consult the Code they will find that the canons incline toward openness. The presumption is clearly in favor of freedom of expression and association, in favor of collaboration in discerning the signs of the times.