

4-27-08 - Reforming the Roman Catholic Church key issue at Voice of Faithful conference

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The Voice of the Faithful Chapter in the Diocese of Bridgeport was exhorted to continue its efforts to reform the Roman Catholic Church during its 6th annual conference Saturday at Fairfield University.

"I'm very upset that more Catholic leaders from the religious orders and universities haven't come forward in support of your effort," said David J. O'Brien, Ph.D., Loyola Professor Emeritus of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross.

"Where is everyone? They are so timid."

The author of a half dozen books on Roman Catholic history in America, who recently retired from the VOTF Board of Trustees, illuminated episodes that have impacted the lives of the faithful and their relationship to society and the church hierarchy.

The first dealt with the early years of church in this country when every parish was created by lay trustees who retained ownership of their churches while negotiating for priests to serve them. This gradually evolved into a bishop-dominated church structure with priests subservient to them, but relative independence from Rome. After 1829, when laws began being enacted that required trustees to turn over church property to bishops before being recognized and awarded a priest, the laity became further divorced from governance.

"There were some very serious fights over that because the trustees didn't want to give up control of their property," O'Brien said. "It reached the point of riots in South Carolina and Virginia."

With Vatican I came the implementation of an ecclesiocentric world view that promoted a Roman Catholic subculture in America that continued to devalue the laity while simultaneously instilling a higher level of professionalism in the clergy, O'Brien continued.

"All institutions between the Pope and the parish were viewed with suspicion," he said.

A papal letter to America in 1895 showed Rome's concern about the situation here by establishing an Apostolic Delegate who would develop a blueprint for the church.

"This was quite a surprise to some American bishops because they were hoping to have their own delegate in Rome," O'Brien said.

In conclusion, the professor said the church of today is basically owned by the bishops and that there is little prospect for change in canon law despite strong theological and pastoral support for new efforts toward shared responsibility such as is championed by VOTF.

"A greater sense of solidarity is needed to support the reform that would bring a new sense of lay responsibility," he said.

During the program, VOTF Chairman John Marshall Lee of Bridgeport presented \$1,000 grants to nine non-profit social service agencies, most of them involved in the distribution of food "which has become so expensive," he voted.

The grants from the organization's Voice of Compassion Fund, created to bypass the Bishop's Fund of the Bridgeport Diocese, went to: Manna House and Notre Dame Convalescent Home, both of Norwalk; New Covenant House and the Sexual Assault Crisis and Education Center, both of Stamford; the Dorothy Day Center of Danbury, and the Thomas Merton Center, Bridgeport Rescue Mission, Frank Habansky Food Pantry and Shepherds, all of Bridgeport.

During the afternoon session, Paul Lakeland, Ph.D., Aloysius P. Kelley, S.J., chairman of Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, and a sponsor of the conference, spoke on the theological perspectives of church property ownership.

Joseph F. O'Callaghan of Norwalk and Daniel B. Sullivan of New Canaan were moderators of panel discussion groups, while Margaret Hickey of Norwalk led the opening prayer.