

Voice of the Faithful
In The Diocese of Bridgeport
Annual Report
July 2011 To July 2012

From: Jamie Dance, Co-Chairman

Our year began with planning sessions for our fall program entitled *Whither Our Parishes*. The impetus for this program was a letter from a Bridgeport Catholic who feared that his beloved parish would be closed in the near future. Rumors regarding parish closures in the diocese had been rampant and news of the appointment of a diocesan priest, Fr. Towsley, to study the issue had been made public. As a board, we agreed to focus our general programs for the fall on this issue, and meetings would be both informational and investigative. Also, a letter outlining our plans was sent to Bishop Lori. We were very fortunate that the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University hosted an early September lecture by Jason Berry, author of *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money In The Catholic Church* that detailed diocesan malfeasance in the closure and sale of Church property. Building on this opportunity, our first General Meeting featured Peter Borre of Boston who has challenged the bishops on parish closures and championed the cause of parishioners who have waged long battles to keep them open. In the three subsequent sessions, in October, November and December, we asked our members to reflect on the following topics: 1. Parish Life; 2. Parish Property and Finance; and 3. The Future of Our Parishes. The results of these sessions then were compiled by Anne Pollack, and reflected the opinion that most people were happy with their parishes, while others resented the presence of foreign priests and poor homilies among other things. VOTF-Bridgeport is pleased that these sessions raised awareness and promoted a sense of parish ownership in the diocese.

VOTF-Bridgeport continued to hold General Meetings at the Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk, and offered board members the opportunity to dine, at their own expense, with our speakers prior to the meetings. Our monthly board meetings have been held at Grace Episcopal Church in Norwalk for the past year. However, we now are looking for another accommodation since our meeting room is no longer available.

2011-2012 Programs:

Peter Borre, Council of Parishes, Boston. "Diocesan Power and Parish Closings."

Margaret Mooney and Jeanne Fogg, Emmaus Community. "Whither Our Parishes? Alternatives."

John Seitz, Fordham University, author of *No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns*. "Closing Parishes."

Bill Nash, survivor. "Sexual Abuse Among the Xaverian Missionaries."

In addition: As stated earlier, three of our general meetings in the fall were given over to group discussions regarding the status of parishes in the diocese. In April, our Women's Group hosted a showing of the documentary, *Pink Smoke Over The Vatican*.

Tenth Anniversary Celebration and Picnic, June 12, Fayerweather Yacht Club:

To celebrate this great occasion and our remarkable accomplishments as an affiliate, Joseph O'Callaghan produced a marvelous booklet chronicling our history, entitled *Who We Are And How We Came To Be*. Illustrated by Margaret Hickey, it graphically accounts for our support for the goals and aspirations of VOTF. Joe has dedicated this history to Robert Mulligan, our friend and colleague who passed away this year.

Annual Conference, March 24 at Fairfield University:

Our Annual Conference, presented by Fairfield University Center for Catholic Studies and VOTF Bridgeport, featured keynote speaker Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, retired Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, Australia, and author of *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*. His topic was "Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus." Professor Paul Lakeland responded to the address and moderated the following discussion.

"Young Catholic Voices", a student panel followed Bishop Robinson and reflected on his presentation, offering comments from their own experience and perspective. This is always a very popular part of our conference, since VOTF as an organization represents a far more senior part of the Catholic population.

The conference was closed with a prayer.

Fourth Annual VOTF Bridgeport Volunteer Award:

This award, The Saint Anselm of Canterbury Award, honors service to our organization. It was presented at our conference to Margaret Hickey for her continuing outstanding contribution to our affiliate as Corresponding Secretary. Marge lets the world know that we are here, and always makes us look good.

2012 Voice of Compassion Awards:

Gifts amounting to \$9,000 were distributed to seven non-profit organizations at the conference. Among those receiving grants were the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, Daughters of Charity, Dorothy Day Hospitality House, Norwalk Christian Community Action, Manna House of Hospitality, Center for Sexual Assault Crisis Counseling and Education, and SNAP-CT.

The Year In Review:

This has been a challenging year for our affiliate. On a personal note, the death of Robert Mulligan was gravely felt by our members, and his contribution to the board deeply missed. More broadly, hierarchical attacks on noted women theologians Elizabeth Johnson and Margaret Farley, and on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious have left us despairing of any real acknowledgement by our leaders of the contributions these women make to the future and well being of our Church. Added to this, the strong-arm legal tactics of the bishops toward Bishop Accountability.org are a cause of great concern to victims, survivors, and their supporters. It is painful to look at our Church and acknowledge how far afield we are from the example of Jesus Christ. But we soldier on, knowing that we are the last generation that actually remembers the pre-Vatican II Church, and continues to cherish the hopes of Kung, Congar, and Schillebeeckx.

Internally, our Board of Directors has begun to suffer from the same attrition that most organizations about our age do. While we continue to operate at full throttle, more and more is done by fewer and fewer. The good news is that we have a core group of members who are both talented and dedicated to VOTF Bridgeport. Their energy and support keep us going. I am constantly amazed at the products produced by this cadre of incredible people. Our two study groups remain active. The Women's Group staged a showing of *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican* in the spring and continues its vocal support of women religious. The study group on Church Governance, led by Jamie Dance, studied Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest For The Living God* in the fall, and followed it with a study of "Saints and Saintliness" from a historical perspective. This fall, we will discuss *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity* edited by Michael Lacey and Francis Oakley.

The Future:

Our affiliate now is preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. For the first time, our general meetings will consist of a series of lectures whose themes are the documents of Vatican II. We are thrilled that an outstanding group of theologians, each with a command of her/his subject, has agreed to speak to us. We hope many of our members will take advantage of this rare opportunity to hear the best and brightest on a subject close to our hearts.

VOTF Bridgeport currently awaits the naming of our new bishop. William Lori, now archbishop of Baltimore, has emerged on the national stage as defender of religious freedom, having stripped us of any rights to meet on Church property. We hope and pray that God (and the pope) will grant us a pastoral and loving bishop to take his place.