

Voice of the Faithful
In the Diocese of Bridgeport
Annual Report
July, 2015- June, 2016

From: Jamie Dance, Chairperson

This year marks VOTF-Bridgeport's fourteenth year as an affiliate. We remain committed to our goals: support for the abused, support for priests of integrity, and structural change within the Church. Our range of programs and meetings have met these criteria and exceeded them, thus helping our members to stay informed and engaged in the life of our local Church. We enjoy a friendly relationship with Bishop Frank Caggiano and are grateful for his continued willingness to meet with us on a regular basis. As reported last year, we again eliminated our winter general meetings (December, January, and February) because of weather concerns that formerly led to either very low attendance or cancellation. This has helped us immensely in our financial planning and programming. The Diocesan Synod in which four of our board members participated was closed with a beautiful Mass at the Arena at Harbor Yard in Bridgeport on September 19. Two Post-Synod Sessions have been held to update the delegates on the progress of the programs promoted during the Synod. Reports on all Synod and Post-Synod meetings are available on our VOTF-Bridgeport website. We remain a very active and enthusiastic affiliate, one of the few left in the United States. I attribute most of this energy to the incredible board members who serve our affiliate. However, we have noted a decrease in general attendance at our meetings and conferences over the years. As a result, the board decided to send out a questionnaire to the membership, asking their opinions on our viability and performance. The poll results were very positive, and we are now doing advanced planning for two years out. The official report is now posted on the website.

2015-2016 Programs:

Since September 2015, our speakers have included:

“Social Justice in the Diocese of Bridgeport”- A panel discussion featuring Reverend Ray Dancy of the Macedonia Church, John Santa of the Malta Justice Initiative, Jeannette Archer-Simons of the Open Door Shelter, and Dr. Richard Maiberger of Norwalk Hospital and a member of our board.

Janet Ruffing , Yale Divinity School, speaking on “Spiritual Friendship: The Example of Elisabeth Leseur and Soeur Marie Goby”

Rita Ferrone, speaking on “More Important Than Bishops? Pope Francis’s Mixed Record on Women”

William Mottolese, speaking on “James Joyce and Church Reform”

Patrick Turner, Director of Strategic and Pastoral Planning for the Diocese of Bridgeport, speaking on “The Implementation of Synod Initiatives”

Annual Conference At Fairfield University

Sex, Marriage, And Keeping The Faith:

Reflections on Pope Francis and Synod on the Family

March 12, 2016

Our annual conference, co-sponsored by the Fairfield University Center for Catholic Studies and VOTF-Bridgeport, featured Professor Christine Firer Hinze of Fordham University as our keynote speaker. Her address was very well received and stimulated a number of comments among the attendees. We instituted “table discussions” to follow the keynote speech a few years ago, and they have become a popular feature of the conference, and this year was no exception. The Q&A that ensued was a remarkable success and thoroughly enjoyed by the audience and our speaker. A panel discussion followed, entitled **“Intimacy/Rules and Regulations”**.

Panelists included a young married couple, Julia and Daniel Cosacchi, Joseph F. O'Callaghan, and Richard Maiberger. While each perspective was personal, it was interesting to see common parallels and reflections on marriage and relationships. Audience participation made this particular conference very successful, many attendees commenting that this was one of our best. As mentioned earlier in this report, low attendance has been one of the issues that our affiliate has been concerned with. Because our overhead demands a minimum number of paid attendances, we suffer a loss when that number is not met. This conference was no exception.

Annual Volunteer Of The Year Award

VOTF's Saint Anselm of Canterbury Award was presented to Richard Maiberger, our friend and board member. Dick is a practicing psychiatrist, our board secretary, and sound system expert. At every step, Dick has been a wise counselor and a willing helper, even to the point of learning skills he never knew he had. VOTF-Bridgeport and our board would be poorer without him. It is an honor to know him.

2016 Voice of Compassion Awards

Since the Voice of Compassion (VOC) Fund's inception, a total of more than \$138,000 has been awarded to a variety of organizations serving the poor and needy. Each year 100 percent of the money collected is given directly to charity. Contributions to the VOC fund are tax deductible, and interested members are annually invited to serve on the Granting Committee led by board member Bob Wilkins. When grants are distributed at the VOTF conferences, representatives are given the opportunity to describe their work on behalf of the needy. This year, contributions to the VOC fund totaled over \$6,500. Among those receiving grants were the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, Daughters of Charity Rescue Mission, Open Door Shelter, Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests-CT, and the Safe Environments Office of the Diocese of Bridgeport.

The Year In Review

This has been a year of reflection for us. As mentioned previously, our concern for the lower attendance at our meetings and conference has led us to look for ways to encourage our current members and attract new ones. Interestingly, the general meeting speakers have been very well received, leading us to believe that the low attendance numbers are not occurring because of the quality of our programs. Rather, we have come to believe that it is a function of an older membership, when weather, illness, and retirement dominate decisions to attend. Because we have developed a friendly and respectful relationship with Bishop Caggiano, we have reached out to him, asking that VOTF be allowed to advertise our meetings in the diocesan newspaper and online. We await his response. Whatever his answer, we remain committed to being the voice of conscience in the diocese, standing by victims and survivors and supporting their friends and families. We have also established a close working relationship with SNAP-CT and its leader Gail Howard, thus keeping us in touch with our founding principles.

As a working board, we have excelled at what we do best- finding speakers and programs that interest and enrich our members. It is a pleasure to work with each of them, all contributing in one way or another to our success. Bill Sweeney, a selfless volunteer, keeps our website up to date and looking sharp. Our Women's Group continues to meet and sponsored our November meeting, a great success. The Study Group on Church and Related Issues studied the Book of Job, its history and provenance (the group still can't believe that Job was not Jewish!). The conversations were stimulating and enlightening, and, while hard to believe, sometimes riotously funny.

The Future

The institution of a two-year plan, a result of our recent poll, allows VOTF to move forward cautiously but with great resolve. We already have enlisted speakers for the 2016-2017 general meetings and conference, and anticipate another interesting year (Bishop Caggiano will be speaking to our members in May). Because of generous donors, including Paul Lakeland's Center for Catholic Studies, we are financially secure for the time being. While our profile is no longer as high as it was during the Synod, we feel that the bishop recognizes our contribution to the diocese, if only in terms of adult education. Bishop Caggiano has achieved a very high profile in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in a very short period of time. We do worry that all of the Synod innovations will not be in place before he is called to a larger and more prominent archdiocese. This would be most problematic for the diocese and us. We pray for his continued presence in Bridgeport.