

Voice of the Faithful
In the Diocese of Bridgeport

Annual Report
August, 2016- May, 2017

From: Jamie Dance, Chairperson

This has been a landmark year for our affiliate. After fifteen years of service to our diocese, we are dissolving our affiliate. It was a difficult and somewhat painful decision that was necessitated by rising expenses and decreased attendance at our meetings and conferences. The aging of our membership played a large role in the gradual withdrawal of members. In years past, our general meetings attracted as many as sixty people, and our conferences over a hundred people. For the last two years, our general meetings' attendance ranged from twenty- two to perhaps thirty. Even the attendance at our meeting with Bishop Caggiano in 2015 was less than fifty people. It became rather obvious from a financial standpoint that we could no longer continue to present note-worthy speakers for our general meetings and conferences. Our efforts to persuade Bishop Caggiano to allow us to advertise our programming in the *Fairfield County Catholic* and our parish bulletins were denied. Bishop also denied our request to hold our meetings in parishes that were amenable to hosting us. This quashed our efforts to attract a larger and younger audience. Thus, the Church in the Diocese of Bridgeport has lost its only venue for the education of adult Catholics in current theology, Catholic thought, diocesan issues such as parish closures, outreach to the survivors of abuse, and multiple other subjects that affect Catholic life in the diocese. As a board, we had to acknowledge that there is a "time and place" for everything and our affiliate had reached its end. We will miss the camaraderie and stimulation that has been such a great part of our organization and particularly our board. Our "Valedictory," written by Joseph O'Callaghan, is posted on our website.

2016-2017 Programs:

Since September 2016, our speakers have included:

“Spotlight: The Movie and Its Impact”- A panel discussion featuring Dan Tepfer, reporter for the *Connecticut Post* and Gail Howard, Chair of SNAP-CT

“The Courage to Love: Christian Witness in a Weighted World”- Jeannine Hill Fletcher of Fordham University

“A Post-Traumatic Church: Vatican I and the ‘long 19th century’- Fr. Jeffrey von Arx, President of Fairfield University

“Confronting Religious Violence; A Panel Discussion – Ellen Umansky and Martin Nguyen of Fairfield University, and Brian Stiltner of Sacred Heart University, representing Judaism, Islam, and Christianity

Annual Conference at Fairfield University:

A Woman’s Place is in the Church

March 25, 2017

Our annual conference, co-sponsored by the Fairfield University Center for Catholic Studies and VOTF-Bridgeport, featured Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College as our keynote speaker. Professor Imperatori-Lee was a real crowd-pleaser who knew her audience. VOTF-Bridgeport has long supported the rights of women in the Church, and her address spoke to this dimension of our commitment to Church reform. Following table discussions and Q&A, Dr. Eleanor Sauers of Fairfield University responded to Imperatori-Lee’s speech and broadened our understanding of the topic by referring to the experience of women in parish life. A panel discussion followed, entitled “Our Lives in the Church”. Panelists included three long-term VOTF members, Joanne Bray, Annette Maiberger, and Sheila Rietano. Each spoke from her personal experience as a

Catholic woman in a male-dominated Church. Many in the audience commented on the heart-felt reflections of the women and how common many of the memories and experiences were. Once again, this conference was a terrific success from the standpoint of the speaker and audience participation and enjoyment. But low attendance, only 36 people, meant that without the support of the Center for Catholic Studies, it would have been a financial loss.

Annual Volunteer Of The Year Award

VOTF's Saint Anselm of Canterbury Award was presented to James Alvord, one of our founding members. Jim has been a determined advocate for survivors, never allowing us to forget that sex abuse of children by priests whom they and their families had every reason to trust was the motive for bringing VOTF into being. We happily applaud Jim's devotion and dedication to the mission of Voice of the Faithful.

2017 Voice of Compassion Awards

Since the Voice of Compassion (VOC) Fund's inception in 2003, ninety-four grants have been awarded to 25 charities. VOC was established to meet the needs of many Catholics who were reluctant to contribute to the Annual Bishop's Appeal in the aftermath of the clergy sexual abuse and financial scandals. Annually one hundred percent of funds solicited and collected are distributed to grant recipients. This year, funds were awarded to the Daughters of Charity, Open Door Shelter, and the Safe Environments Office of the Diocese of Bridgeport.

The Year in Review

This has been a year for change for VOTF-Bridgeport. While not desired, our dissolution was not unexpected. As mentioned earlier in this report, our inability to attract new and younger members was the keystone of our decision. We regret the shortsightedness of the diocese in not allowing us to reach out to adult Catholics who long for spiritual and intellectual enrichment that our programming provided. The “listening sessions” that Bishop Caggiano held prior to the Synod identified a distinct and broad-based dissatisfaction with homilies across the entire diocese. This lack of theological and spiritual depth among our priests (particularly the younger ones) creates a vacuum that only can lead to spiritual hunger in the parishes. Because priests are in short supply, dioceses across the country have abbreviated seminary education and thus intentionally created a group of soon-to-be priests without a great deal of necessary knowledge to address the issues of families and children, and all that goes with living in a modern world that demands a certain sophistication. Also, as a result of the aging senior priests, these young and unprepared men will soon be pastors. Pew Research has reported that the state of Connecticut has the lowest percentage of Catholics who still attend Mass regularly. This cannot be an accident. And while Bishop Caggiano has made many efforts to reform the diocese and keep families and children in the Church, I fear that, in not addressing the education of seminarians, he is creating his own problem, one that will, in the future, prove fatal for the faith of many Catholics in the diocese.

I will congratulate Bishop Caggiano on his outreach to victims and survivors of clerical abuse. For the first time, the diocese held a “Service of Peace, Hope, and Healing for Victims of Sexual Abuse as Minors by Members of the Clergy” in October, 2016. It was a beautiful liturgy that included music and readings as well as personal reflections by survivors. Held at Fairfield University’s Egan Chapel, the service was coordinated by a planning group of survivors in conjunction with the diocese. Bishop Caggiano’s homily was an earnest and honest appraisal of our history and pledge that clerical abuse would never again be tolerated.

I would like to thank my board for the wonderful work they have done over the years. Talents were found in great abundance when we needed them. The very fact that our affiliate remained active and involved for so many years is a tribute to them. Bill Sweeney, our web-master for so many years, has always made us look very good, and we appreciate it. The Women's Group and Study Group remained active until the end. I think all will miss the stimulation and friendships that both provided. I know I will. Finally, it is our fervent hope that the men and women of the Diocese of Bridgeport will carry on our dedication and wish to be "a prayerful voice attentive to the Holy Spirit through which God's faithful people can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church."