2-6-08 - Third speaker denied platform by Catholic diocese
By VICTORIA MACCHI, Naples News (FL)

For the third time in less than a year, a speaker brought to Naples by the lay Catholic group Voice of the Faithful Southwest Florida was denied a platform at area Catholic churches by the Diocese of Venice.

Instead of speaking at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, as Voice of the Faithful and church pastor the Rev. Thomas Glackin had officially requested in late 2007, embattled Catholic theologian the Rev. Charles Curran will speak Thursday evening at St. Katherine Greek Orthodox Church in North Naples.

Voice of the Faithful, which has held speaker events since 2002, received official correspondence from the Diocese on Jan. 2, 2008, that their request for Curran to speak on his book "Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian" was denied.

Speakers within the Diocese must be approved through Bishop Frank Dewane.

Curran, 73, holds two doctorates in sacred theology and was a professor or moral theology at Catholic University of America for more than 20 years until 1986, when he was stripped of his right to be a professor of Catholic theology by the Church.

In a 1993 interview with Time Magazine, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained that Curran's removal as a professor came because he had "moved beyond individual questions to challenge the Church's teaching office as such."

With knowledge of the speakers in question, the Diocese of Venice made a statement available to the Daily News this week describing why three Voice of the Faithful speakers were banned from speaking in local Catholic churches. The statement didn't include names of the speakers.

"As bishop, (Dewane) does not have to give these speakers a forum to speak against the teachings of the Church and the Church herself," the statement said.

"The speakers in question have repeatedly expressed positions which contradict the Church's teachings and doctrine," it added.

Although the statement denies that the issue is about free speech, Peg Clark, president and founding member of the local Voice of the Faithful chapter, thinks otherwise.

"The church should never impose a limitation on an exchange of ideas," she said the day before Curran, now a tenured professor at Southern Methodist University, was to speak in Naples. "Catholics are well aware of free will and have the ability to think and use their intellect."

But the situation with Curran didn't come as a surprise to Clark.

In March 2007, laicized priest Anthony T. Padovano also was banned by the Diocese from speaking; he instead lectured at Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church.

Following this and the ban on Curran, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, former lieutenant governor of Maryland and author of "Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way," also is being denied a diocese-sanctioned venue. She is scheduled to speak at St. Katherine's at the end of February.

"The major aim of the adult (Voice of the Faithful) program is education. The most important thing we can do is introduce them to the best Catholic minds that we know of," Clark said of the decision to bring Curran and Townsend to Naples.

The nonprofit organization came together locally in 2002 primarily to discuss the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. Voice of the Faithful also addresses issues with what it calls "bureaucracy or management" within the Church at monthly meetings.

At St. Katherine's, although the Rev. Hans Jacobse is familiar with Curran as a theologian, he told the Daily News that for the Greek Orthodox Church to allow the event, "it's strictly a business decision… They were just looking for a place, that's all. We had the room; it's nothing more than that."

Voice of the Faithful is renting the space at the church on Airport-Pulling Road.

"I know (Curran) is a little controversial, but he's a respectable theologian," Jacobse added. "They're not bringing in people of ill-repute so to speak ... he doesn't always tow the party line, but he's no slouch."