

March 8, 2007 – Catholic Group Challenges Diocese Over Allegations at Greenwich Church
Greenwich Times

The recent allegations of financial mismanagement against Father Michael Moynihan at Saint Michael the Archangel Parish and Saint Timothy Chapel not only have led to his resignation but to a new front opening in an ongoing conflict between the Diocese of Bridgeport and a nationwide group of Catholics asking for more transparency and access.

At its annual meeting April 28 at Fairfield University, the Bridgeport diocese's chapter of Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) will discuss financial accountability within the diocese and will specifically touch on the situation at Saint Michael. Father Moynihan resigned in January after 14 years at the North Street church after an independent auditor discovered two off-the-books accounts, the second of which came after Father Moynihan signed a written statement saying there was only one. No criminal charges have been filed and diocese officials said at the time they believed the money was used for legitimate church expenses and not fraud.

VOTF was created in Boston, Mass., in the aftermath of the sex abuse scandal and subsequent cover-up inside the city's diocese. There are chapters nationwide, but the Bridgeport chapter is one of the few that has been banned from holding meetings on any property owned by the diocese. This has brought VOTF's local members into sharp conflict with Bishop William Lori.

The Bridgeport chapter's Chairman John Lee said VOTF is made up of "middle of the road, faithful Catholics who have had positions of responsibility inside their parishes." He said the organization was committed to three principles, supporting victims of abuse, supporting "priests of integrity" and working for structural change within the church. Mr. Lee said the structure by which all priests took vows of obedience to the bishop gave bishops too much power.

"We think we are worthy of being listened to as much as any other group of faithful Catholics, but we are banned from meeting on any church property," Mr. Lee said to the Post on Tuesday. He added that the ban, which is not in effect in the Archdiocese of Hartford, has hurt membership for the chapter.

Diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said he didn't wish to comment about VOTF. The diocese first issued a statement about VOTF in 2002 in which Bishop Lori said the organization "promotes a hidden agenda that is in conflict with the teachings of the Catholic faith."

Bishop Lori accused VOTF of espousing views on sexual morality and celibacy that were contrary to Christ's teachings. In the statement, Bishop Lori said pastors should listen to the concerns and questions of Catholics, but that he couldn't support letting VOTF hold its meetings on church property because of their "agenda."

"While my firm stand against Voice of the Faithful may be unpopular among some Catholics it would be hypocritical for me, and a failure of my leadership, to imply support for an organization which is so contrary to our faith," Bishop Lori said in the statement.

Mr. McAleer said Bishop Lori stood by the statement and the diocese had nothing to add.

Thomas Saccardi, who attends St. Catherine's in Riverside, is one of the Greenwich members of VOTF. He said he got involved because he felt VOTF was doing important work.

"There should be more openness in all aspect of church life," Mr. Saccardi said.

He added he agreed with VOTF about the bishops having too much power, saying, "That might have worked in the Dark Ages, but not now."

Mr. Saccardi said he had concerns about the financial issues within the church, but didn't want to comment

about the situation at St. Michael's.

“It would be better if the church was more open in terms of how funds are acquired and what they are needed for,” Mr. Saccardi said. “It needs to be more accountable to the Catholic community.”

Mr. Lee said the members wanted the church to become more “open, accountable and transparent.” He said this in specific relation to the sexual abuse claims, which came from all over the country, and the refusal of Bishop Lori to release court documents related to the cases, some of which are still pending in the diocese. Mr. Lee said this information should be shared with the public and said the same was true in regard to financial issues including the situation at St. Michael.

Mr. Lee said there were financial questions inside the diocese that needed public scrutiny, including what kind of financial work each diocese prepares and what does it share and who is responsible for putting budgets together in the diocese. Mr. Lee said it also deserved to be asked why the Catholic church was the only religion where the religious leaders are also the temporal property owners.

There have been no public statements from Father Moynihan regarding his resignation, and the investigation from the outside auditing firm Grant Thornton is ongoing. However, Mr. Lee, a resident of Bridgeport, offered a theory: He said it didn't appear that Father Moynihan had spent the money on himself and said it was possible that Father Moynihan simply didn't want the money placed in accounts to which the diocese would have access.

Money donated by people in churches throughout the nation have been used to pay for settlements and legal fees in the sex abuse cases. Mr. Lee said that includes \$40-million worth of payments from the Bridgeport diocese, including money raised by selling 40 acres of property around St. Agnes Church on Stanwich Road, which will now be used to house an expanded Stanwich School.

“I think what happened at St. Michael is that it's possible the pastor had lay people in his congregation who were very generous,” Mr. Lee said. “Did they say they didn't want their money to go to the bishop? Is that why the accounts were there?”

Mr. McAleer commented only on the ongoing investigation into Father Moynihan's financial practices. He said there was no update on when findings would be released.

“I know people are wondering what's going on with this, but this is an investigation that will take time,” Mr. McAleer said. “It will take as long as it has to in order to be thorough and complete. That's what the people of the diocese expect.”

The allegations against Father Moynihan, who is still termed “a priest of good standing” within the diocese, will be discussed at VOTF's April 28 meeting, which is scheduled to begin at 9:30 a.m. Mr. Lee said the meeting would feature an address from VOTF's New York chapter president Mary Pat Fox but would only hint at the nature of the discussion.

“I can't tip my hand on what we're going to do on April 28, but I think it will be something for the education of all lay Catholics,” Mr. Lee said.