

Catholic lay group lacks church approval, but not convictions

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ROCKFORD -- Defying the bishop of the Rockford diocese, local members of a Catholic lay organization held a meeting Sunday in a church sanctuary.

Bishop Thomas Doran, who has said Voice of the Faithful is not a sanctioned Catholic group, has denied the Rockford affiliate of the organization the right to meet on church property and refused to meet with members.

Aimee Carevich Hariramani, an official of Voice of the Faithful who came from Boston to attend the meeting, called Sunday's participants pioneers.

"This is a really special moment in the life of this group," she said.

Voice of the Faithful was formed in response to the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. According to its literature, the group's mission is threefold: support victims of clergy abuse, support priests of integrity and shape structural change within the parameters of the church.

Started in 2002 with a handful of members in Massachusetts, the group now claims more than 25,000 registered supporters in the U.S. and 21 other countries.

The Rockford chapter began last year and, like many other affiliates nationwide, has been met with suspicion by local church authorities. In Boston, where the sex-abuse scandal first made headlines, a few groups are allowed to meet on church property, but all other chapters have been denied that right, Hariramani said.

On Sunday in the Cathedral of St. Peter in Rockford, about 75 members of Voice of the Faithful, from as far away as Geneva, Arlington Heights and Wisconsin, filled the back rows. They participated in the mass and held a brief meeting.

Exiting parishioners seemed puzzled as the group began the meeting with "The Lord's Prayer." The presiding pastor, Rev. Steven Sabo, did not acknowledge the group's presence.

"I was told by Bishop Doran that there would be a 'group of buttons' here," Sabo said after mass, referring to the red-garbed members who sported buttons with the organization's logo.

Doran was unavailable for comment Sunday.

Hariramani, who is a parish organizer and trainer for Voice of the Faithful, told the members as they gathered afterward at a coffee shop that "you, as a group, have shown us on a national level what to do when the doors are shut. You are the first group to move to action."

Jack Kernan, who came from Arlington Heights for the meeting, said he has been a Catholic for 70 years. He said he joined Voice of the Faithful a year ago "when I saw the need for the faithful to become involved and take responsibility in the church."

Kernan said he felt the church "lacked a proper response to its victims of sexual abuse."

Bunny Matus, also of Arlington Heights, agreed. "We have to face [the abuse scandal] and have bishops do the right thing," Matus said.

More than 100 years after fire nearly destroyed St. Ann's Church in Hampton, those who know where to look can still see the scars.

Up in the attic, above the sanctuary, are remnants of the original barrel-vaulted ceiling that burned in 1903.

"The church was severely damaged," said the Rev. Michael Saharic.

The soaring brick Catholic church in the tiny Hunterdon County town was spared the worst, however, when Hampton's fledgling volunteer fire department, just four years old