

Emotions Boil Over at Voice of the Faithful Meeting

Priest Accuses Voice of the Faithful of Hypocrisy

By FRANCIS X. FAY

Hour Senior Writer

Feb 6, 2004

NORWALK — The Voice of the Faithful was accused of hypocrisy during its monthly meeting Thursday, February 5th in the First Congregational Church on the Green.

The suggestion was offered by the Rev. Christopher Walsh, diocesan liaison to VOTF who attends the monthly meetings, but rarely speaks. It came following a presentation by Catharine Henningsen, of Rye Brook, N.Y., founder of SALT, the independent Catholic journal of opinion and former editor of The American Catholic, who spoke on the abuse being suffered by accused priests in the pedophilia scandal.

Walsh cited the case of a diocesan priest accused by an alleged victim of an alleged act 30 years ago. The accused priest's case had been reviewed twice and he had been vindicated twice by the review.

"When Bishop Lori cleared this priest it was VOTF demonstrating outside St. Augustine Cathedral about how the bishop has to kick this guy out," Walsh said. "Yet, you (VOTF) were out there demonstrating in front of St. Augustine Cathedral that this priest be removed when reviews of his case had failed to conclude guilt. Ladies and gentlemen. Isn't there some hypocrisy there?"

"I'm offended when Father Walsh talks about hypocrisy," said Sheila Reitano, a VOTF member from Norwalk. "We went to the bishop through letters and told him that we wanted to help with this problem. We felt it was our problem as well as his. And we were ignored. To hear you (Walsh) say we're hypocritical when we were there because we were outraged that the victim's needs were not being addressed, to be called hypocritical for that feels wrong."

Reitano's comment drew strong applause from the 85 present.

Walsh had said earlier that pressure from groups such as VOTF and the media had forced the bishops' hands during the Dallas conference last year in which they formulated the "Zero Tolerance" standard in the crisis.

"A leak that they were considering a one chance before expulsion had been met with such a firestorm of criticism that they had to come out with zero tolerance," he said.

The exchange followed a 45-minute scholarly presentation by Henningsen in which she called for attention to the "Second Wave of Abuse — The Fate of Our Accused Priests."

She went into canon law in the effort to explain why accused priests deserve much more public sympathy until they have been shown to be guilty after due process.

"A major problem is the few lawyers trained in canon law and the few who

are practicing,” she said. “There are only two church lawyers in Rome handling all these cases which means accused priests have to wait years before their cases can receive final review.”

A major loss from this scandal is the relationship between bishops and their priests.

“A bishop would be the last person a priest with a problem would consult because they are legal adversaries,” she said.

She suggested that another authority be made responsible for dealing with the accusations and not the bishops.

“There is an urgent need for independent lay review boards to evaluate every case of alleged priestly abuse,” she suggested. “What is happening, however, is that the bishops are forwarding these cases to Rome.

Meanwhile, the accused priests are dismissed into the world without jobs and without reasonable means of surviving unless they have strong families to come to their rescue.”

Henningsen has dedicated SALT, also known as The Op-Ed Page of the Catholic Church, “to preserving freedom of inquiry within the Catholic church.”

Her monthly column in the magazine analyses the papacy of Pope John Paul II. She is currently working on a book tentatively titled “Breaking Adam’s Rib: The Legacy of John Paul II to Women.”

Her most recent book, “The Portable Executive: From Corporate Dependency to Self-Direction,” published by Simon & Schuster, was named Best Business Book of 1995 by Library Journal.