

4-23-08 - Barbarito to meet with victims' advocacy group

By LONA O'CONNOR, Palm Beach Post (FL) Religion Writer

Barely a week after Pope Benedict XVI warned bishops to "address the sin of abuse," Palm Beach Bishop Gerald Barbarito will meet on Tuesday with local members of a victims' advocacy group.

The Tuesday meeting between Barbarito and five members of Voice of the Faithful is not their first encounter, but it comes at a time when the Catholic Church's leader focused attention on scandals that have damaged the Church both spiritually and economically.

And it occurs in the Diocese of Palm Beach, which has had more than its share of both sexual and financial revelations. Voice of the Faithful local president John McGovern said his group plans to discuss both with Barbarito.

During his visit to New York last week, Benedict spoke bluntly to the issues, saying he was "deeply ashamed" of the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.

Benedict, who also met privately with victims of sexual abuse by priests, called on bishops to "address the sin of abuse" in a "determined, collective response."

Barbarito arrived in the Palm Beach Diocese in 2003, following two consecutive bishops who resigned amid allegations of their sexual involvement with boys and young men. They were followed by the brief tenure of a third bishop, Sean O'Malley, who spent only nine months in the diocese before being reassigned to Boston, the epicenter of a nationwide priest-sex abuse scandal.

O'Malley was named a cardinal in 2006, replacing Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, who resigned in the midst of the sex scandal and has since been reassigned to the Vatican.

In 2006, two priests were accused of misappropriating \$8.6 million from a Delray Beach parish during a 40 year period. Their case, which is pending, is high on Voice of the Faithful's agenda for Tuesday's meeting with Barbarito, said McGovern.

"We want to know if the diocese is aware of what is being said on the street," said McGovern, referring to rumors that a restitution process is underway, even though the criminal case against the two priests is stalled in Palm Beach Circuit Court. Part of Voice of the Faithful's mission is to improve transparency and accountability in church financial matters.

McGovern said he requested the meeting with Barbarito about a month ago. A diocese spokeswoman confirmed that the meeting is on Barbarito's schedule.

The timing could not be better, said past president Peter Amann, who will also attend the meeting with the bishop.

"Right after the papal visit is just a great time to energize," Amann said.

Barbarito has already met at least one or two times with Voice of the Faithful during his five-year tenure, McGovern said.

Another victims' advocacy organization, Come to the Stable, has had no luck in meeting with Barbarito. Come to the Stable head Michael Wegs asked for a meeting with Barbarito in 2006 but said the bishop never responded. Come to the Stable focuses its efforts on Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell, who resigned in 2002 after allegations that he had inappropriate sexual contact with students in a Missouri seminary. O'Connell replaced Bishop Keith Symons, who left in 1999 amid allegations of sexually abusing boys earlier in his career.

The group would also like to discuss adding more parishes to the potential list of meeting places for Voice of the Faithful, which now meets mostly at a few Catholic parishes in West Palm Beach.

They will also seek the bishop's help in advocating for a longer statute of limitations for sexual abuse cases. A bill addressing the issue is being considered by the Florida Legislature.

"I'm disappointed that the bill is still held in committee," said McGovern. "It wouldn't cost anyone a dollar to change the statute of limitations."

McGovern said he expected that the bishop might have other issues to discuss as well as those raised by Voice of the Faithful, whose motto is "Keep the Faith, Change the Church."

Before the Pope's visit, the group's national president sent him a letter requesting more transparency and accountability on sexual and financial matters.

The letter also requested that His Holiness make financial accountability in U.S. Catholic parishes mandatory, rather than optional.

The group, which has 35,000 members nationwide, has prepared a petition on those issues, to be delivered to the Pope at the end of this month.

Voice of the Faithful was formed in 2002 in response to the clergy sexual abuse scandal.

The next monthly meeting of the Palm Beach County chapter of Voice of the Faithful is scheduled for May 19, time and place to be announced. For further information, call McGovern at 561-736-5568.