

4-29-08 - Group demands Mass for healing after abuse
By Stephen P. Clark, Staff Writer, Stamford Advocate

A week after Pope Benedict XVI urged U.S. Catholics to "foster healing and reconciliation" in response to church sex abuse scandals, a Catholic advocacy group called on Bishop William Lori to celebrate a Mass of Reconciliation and encourage pastors throughout the Bridgeport Diocese to do the same.

Voice of the Faithful, a lay group that formed in 2002, asked Lori in a letter sent last week to follow Benedict's lead by celebrating a Mass of Reconciliation at least once a year in St. Augustine's Cathedral, the mother church of the diocese, and to advise pastors in the diocese's parishes to follow suit.

"Sadly, some 30 of our priests have been accused of sexually assaulting at least 67 of our children, causing them untold suffering," the letter said. "Many of the survivors, now grown to adulthood, often tell us that, feeling abandoned by the church, they do not go to Mass or find it impossible to enter a church.

"Pope Benedict has challenged us to act to try to heal this sore on Christ's Body, the Church. We encourage you to accept his challenge and to call on Catholics throughout our diocese to do so as well. By acknowledging the sin, atoning for the harm done, and working for reconciliation, we will take the first steps toward healing and renewing our beloved Catholic community."

A spokesman for the diocese confirmed Lori received the letter but questioned its relevance.

"This letter is out of touch with what goes on every day of the year in the Diocese of Bridgeport," spokesman Joseph McAleer said in a statement. "At every Mass, every day, in all 87 parishes of the Diocese, clergy and laity pray for peace, healing and reconciliation for all members of the community, especially those who are suffering.

"Our Safe Environments Program, now in its sixth year and exceeding all national standards, is thriving in every parish. More than 30,000 clergy, employees and volunteers - anyone who assists the Catholic Church - has received training and a background check. The awareness level of the warning signs of sexual abuse is extraordinarily high and unmatched by any other organization in society. The diocese, moreover, complies with all laws, responds to every allegation, meets with victims and offers counseling services," he added.

During Benedict's recent visit, his first to the United States, he visited ground zero, addressed the United Nations and celebrated Masses at baseball stadiums in Washington and New York.

Benedict called for reconciliation during his homily during Mass in Nationals Park in Washington.

"No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse," he said. "It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention. Nor can I adequately describe the damage that has occurred within the community of the church. . . . Today, I encourage each of you to do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation, and to assist those who have been hurt."

McAleer noted that during his homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, Benedict encouraged the priests, deacons and parishioners "to cooperate with your bishops who continue to work effectively to resolve this issue."

According to Bishop Accountability.org, a nonprofit based in Massachusetts, there have been 109 allegations of sexual abuse made against priests in the Bridgeport Diocese by 107 people. Sixty of the allegations are claimed to have occurred between 1970 and 1979.

The diocese has spent \$37.7 million since 1953 settling lawsuits from abuse victims.