

2-10-08 -Your Voice: Diocese provides another lesson for parishioners

JOHN MARSHALL LEE, Connecticut Post

One more chapter in the story of a priest of the Diocese of Bridgeport was revealed on Feb. 4. The New York Post featured new details on Father Michael Moynihan, resigned pastor of St. Michael in Greenwich. Financial mismanagement, including multiple accounts of \$500,000 or more involving disobedience of Diocesan directives and/or possible financial mismanagement, caused his removal in January. The article reported a long-term habitation of a one-bedroom Manhattan apartment by Moynihan and a roommate, Michael Fawcett, an actor and singer. Previous denials by Father Moynihan of stories about this relationship proved false. The diocese promptly suspended Father Moynihan's public ministry and sacramental functions. Yet there is as yet no financial report after a year of research and review of parish records by the diocese on whether there was any financial abuse by Moynihan, and, if so, the real extent or nature of it. There has been no statement as to whether legal authorities are or have been involved.

The diocese continues to make no comments about clergymen who seem to have failed significantly in their vocational promises, as if that was of no matter to the people in the pews. The stories of Michael Jude Fay, until 2006 pastor of St. John in Darien, and of Michael Moynihan, until 2007 pastor at St. Michael in Greenwich, are troubling in that they combine questions of financial and vocational integrity. By church law, these pastors were the last word within their parish responsible for Christian mission and material resources. Their power granted by Canon Law superseded any and all laypersons whether employee, volunteer or parish member in that community. Within the past year, the diocese has rapidly called for new financial systems, central reporting and checks and balances, including the establishment of lay parish financial councils. However, diocesan documents emphasize that lay people continue in these groups strictly for the purpose of consultation. If the bishop or a pastor does not wish to be consulted, the lay person has no independent rights in a parish. The property and funds of each and every parish belong to the diocese and are directed by the bishop and his appointees. Each parish corporation involves three ordained men and two lay trustees who must be reappointed annually and are subject to removal at any time. Truly, this is not democratic. Nor is it representative. And with the recent institutional history to reflect upon, this system is not working.

A bishop embodies the teaching authority of the church. What might the bishop say today about sex, money and power abuses in the Diocese of Bridgeport? Why has our bishop not told the laity about all of the costs of supporting clergy in pursuit of "a simple life" that he referenced relative to Father Fay last year? What management judgment leads a bishop to approve these two priests for responsible diocesan leadership posts like the diocesan tribunal, sexual abuse and presbyteral councils? Why did the Faith in the Future campaign millions. raised a decade ago. take more than 10 years to appear in Diocesan financial reports to the faithful? Why does the bishop continue to approve major ongoing legal expenses amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars relative to keeping secret the documents including former Bishop Edward Egan's testimony in the settled Rosado sexual abuse case? Where are these legal appeal monies originating, if not ultimately from the people who occupy the pews today or did so yesterday?

Since lay people have no power over parish budgets, which include the "bishop's tax" on all offerings, the school subsidy tax, the Annual Bishop's Appeal obligation, and the maintenance of school, worship and other buildings owned by the bishop, is it surprising that revenues from collections may be decreasing in many parishes? Are American adult Catholics finally waking up to the injustices, the ongoing abuses and the secrets of the current clerical system of church governance? What scandals or embarrassments may be avoided in the future through structural change today? What systems, strategies and learning that adult American Catholics experience every day might we share as people of God with clergy and hierarchy were they open to listening in order to follow Christ's loving example and assist the institutional church? What lesson do you take from today's story?

John Marshall Lee is chairman of Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport.