

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL
IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT
January 8, 2004
Congregational Church on the Green

The meeting opened with prayer. Joe O'Callaghan, Chairman, welcomed newcomers and asked those present who served their parishes as ushers, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, parish council representatives, cantors, liturgy planners, educators, or fund raisers to raise their hands. All of the approximately 50 people present raised their hands.

Financial Report – In Mary Jane Range's absence, Joe reported with gratitude the Wiggins Foundation grant of \$15,000, which resulted in a treasury balance of \$25,000. This figure represents a refund of our initial contribution to the Tri-State Conference, 10/25/03, as well as our share of another surplus refund of \$600. There is an additional surplus refund to be shared by each of the participating VOTF chapters. Joe invited suggestions as to the utilization of these funds.

Voice of Compassion Fund – Of the approximately \$10,000 collected, four contributions of \$2,500 each were donated to 1) The Merton Center, Bridgeport; 2) Family Stages, Bridgeport; 3) Queen of Clergy Home for Retired Priests, Stamford; and 4) The School Sisters of Notre Dame, Wilton. A small balance of \$160 remains in this fund. Jim Alvord announced that press releases with accompanying photos have been submitted to area newspapers and will also be published on our website, www.votfbpt.org on our NEWS and PHOTO GALLERY pages. Joe also noted that when we are advised of the upcoming Open House at the SSND Motherhouse, Wilton, we will extend publicity via our website.

Yale Conference, March, 2003 – On Saturday, January 24, 2004, a presentation of the publication of talks delivered at this conference will be made at 4:00pm at the Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale, New Haven, CT. Copies will be available at approximately \$30. Attendance is open.

Tri-State Conference Video/Audio Tapes Available – We have ten videotapes of the principle talks available to borrow and five audio tapes of talks presented in Freeman Hall available to borrowers as well. A "sign-out" is required.

Articles Available This Evening – On the tables in the gathering room there are several reprints of articles of interest, as well as Minutes from the past two meetings for those without computers. Joe called attention to one article in particular, from AMERICA, written by Thomas Plante, "After the Earthquake" - the awakening of the sleeping Catholic laity.

Audit of the National Council of Catholic Bishops – several articles are available, including the summary by the Diocese of Bridgeport, which has been judged to be in compliance. Jim Alvord commented that S.N.A.P. (a survivors' group) is not pleased; of over 4,000 members nationwide, only 3 were interviewed. A response by Rev. Thomas Doyle, who reported on this scandal some 18 years ago, included what he termed deficiencies in the study—healing, outreach, reconciliation—and asked the question, why was it covered up for such a long time? Joe stated that procedures have been established and people assigned to the Office for Protection of Children; every paid employee and every volunteer are being asked to have criminal background checks done, and also asked to attend a 4-hour training session. The National program is for those who have contact with children; in our diocese, the requirements are for every employee and volunteer, regardless of contact with children. We need to remember that we have reached this state because 23 priests in our diocese have abused 67 children, who have been paid \$37,900,000 to date. Another report is due on February 27th which will include the totals of priest-molesters, victims and amounts paid nationwide.

Future Meetings

February 5 – Catharine Henningsen, editor of SALT, will speak about due process for priests.

March 4 – Svea Fraser, of the Boston VOTF, will speak in the priesthood

April – we are currently in the planning stages of a Saturday conference at Fairfield University. Volunteers are needed to plan this event and should contact Joe.

Kieran Scott, "How the Church Orders its Life: Power and Authority"

Joe introduced this evening's speaker, Kieran Scott, professor of Religious Studies and Religious Education at Fordham, who opened his remarks with a quote from Fr. Brian Hehir, "There is a range of definitely discussible issues in the church." The laity needs to say at every level, "we simply won't accept anything less than adult conversation." Scott defined himself as both conservative and liberal, as a conservative as one who honors the holy tradition, and as a genuine liberal as one who is open-minded and accepting of change. Lay people need to have a say in how authority is exercised in the church. Currently they have no way to address the problem of an incompetent pastor or an authoritative bishop. There are no structures for accountability. Even though Vatican II called the laity to adult conversation, many feel they are still being treated like children.

Today, the Roman Catholic Church is suffering its worst crisis in its history. People are losing their trust. We have a legitimization crisis. Bishops have been slow to grasp that their exercise of office is at the center of the crisis. People are angry. Loyal parishioners are slapped down – that only worsens the problem. The bishops are so intent on defending their authority that they can't recognize who their true friends are; and that results in a dysfunctional system.

This current crisis was 40 years in the making. Conservative thinking was that the Church's authority was undermined because the Vatican II changes went too far; the liberals felt the changes did not go far enough. We need a linguistic clarity of thinking about power and authority—reshaping of how we order our lives together. How do we reform the Catholic Church in the U.S.A.?

Reform is not complete without these words, and unless these words are scrutinized, certain questions can never be asked. It takes a crisis for the church to examine the language that once made sense and can now become destructive. The words are — hierarchy, religious life, and the faithful—of which hierarchy is the single-most important word that needs to be changed today. The Church invented the term and now we use it to define the bishops. This makes no historical or logical sense. Hierarchy means a sacred order or design. It refers to a pattern or design of an institution rather than to a group. For many centuries, the image of hierarchy was concentric circles, a mystical and cosmic term before it was applied to the Church. Without this meaning of hierarchy, few questions of meaningful reform can be asked. The current meaning presents an obstacle to reform. We need linguistic rehabilitation. We must make three interpretive moves—1) turn back with critique to deconstruct linguistically; 2) turn down to retrieve, recover, reclaim; 3) turn out to recreate.

- 1) Fundamentalism resides in the power of the Church. Fundamentalism is the reaction to modernity, defensive and hostile, bound by its own rationalistic certainties. It once was assumed to be a necessity; it gave the Church great stability; now it is in drastic need of reform; this form has become dysfunctional; this form is in crisis; this form lacks a sense of power and beauty.
- 2) Reclaim a richer form of hierarchy. Reference was made to Ezekiel 1:15-60, describing a hierarchy more appropriate to our time. It has to be structured in circles – the most divine symbol, a wheel within a wheel. The Church has the resources to form well-organized clusters of small groups, with authority located in each. A hierarchy of authority arises from the sharing of power in which all communities participate. Everyone here is teacher; everyone is learner; everyone speaks; everyone listens. There are special roles for each person; no privileged role; no elite or exclusively unique role because of status—a new basis for authority.
- 3) A practical move – which would overflow into every aspect of the Church's life:
 - a) Architecture should embody this design of hierarchy. Ministers of liturgy surrounded by community; together they make up the Church – hierarchy – sacred order
 - b) Center of community should be a person or group to facilitate this sacred order
 - c) Religious organization has to be founded on democratic principles; democracy is a way of being together, a way of making decisions; it means effective access, a forum for debate, needing rules to protect each person.

The Catholic Church needs restructuring in a community which can bring to bear well thought-out problems, finding a way to channel that sense of belonging. We need a new source of authority in our church. The only source is the full range of experience of men, women and children. We have symbols, like Koinonia (Greek for “relationship of fellowship”), the sacramentality of all of life, that point the way to new design. It is from the community that authority arises and it is in the community that it is restored and in human life that it is humanized. People become the authors of their own authority; they become the Body of Christ.

The New Testament can be read as an argument on the nature of power and authority. The message challenges the definition of power as might, domination. The New Testament offers the paradox that greater power is found in openness – obedience to God through service. Ministry is answering the call. The early Christians saw that power in the Body Incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ.

A question/answer period followed and centered around the need for more patient, long-term work to be done, especially by the laity, since the priesthood is in a state of “creative dislocation.” Also, as stated previously, the hierarchy does not recognize their true friends and treat them as enemies, while their real enemy is a dysfunctional institution. On the subject of “architecture” – note was made that there are worshipping communities which have embraced the “circle” design, with the priest emerging from the circle of worshippers, creating a deeply spiritual experience.

The meeting closed with prayer.

Respectfully submitted,

G. Seymour, Recording Secretary

**NEXT MEETING, FEBRUARY 5th – CATHARINE HENNINGSSEN TO SPEAK ON
“DUE PROCESS FOR PRIESTS”**