

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL
IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT
February 5, 2004
Congregational Church on the Green

Chairman, Joe O'Callaghan, welcomed approximately 85 in attendance and asked newcomers to introduce themselves.

The meeting began with prayer.

Financial Report – Mary Jane Range, Treasurer, reported a balance of \$25,295.23, which included a total refund to date from the Tri-State Conference of \$2,640.

Voice of Compassion Fund – With a starting balance of \$245, a new drive will be initiated for this fund. All financial reports are posted on our website, www.votfbpt.org

Meetings and other Notices

February 8th, Sunday – 1:00-3:00pm, Eastern Connecticut VOTF will hold a panel discussion at the Days Inn (exit 74), Niantic, CT.

March 5th – next meeting; Svea Fraser, one of the founders of VOTF, will speak on Supporting Priests of Integrity

April 1st – meeting; Landa Mauriello-Vernon, recently named Chairperson of S.N.A.P. in Connecticut, will speak.

May 1st, Saturday session at Fairfield University, with David O'Brien, Director, Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture, College of the Holy Cross, as keynote speaker. Joe will welcome volunteers.

February 17th – Tom Malarkey reminded all of the Greenwich VOTF Affiliate regular monthly meeting at Christ Church, on East Putnam Avenue, Greenwich; 7:15pm

New Books/Publications

OUR FATHERS: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal, by David France.

EVOLVING VISIONS OF THE PRIESTHOOD: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century, by Dean Hoge.

GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE FUTURE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ed. by Francis Oakley and Bruce M. Russett; this covers the presentations at the Yale Conference last Fall.

VOWS OF SILENCE: The Abuse of Power and the Papacy of John Paul II, by Jason Berry and Gerald Renner (who is present here tonight).

“America” – 2/9 -New Steps to Protect the Children, by Kathleen McChesney.

- 2/16 -By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium and the Sense of the Faithful, by Richard Gaillardetz

“Commonweal” – 1/16 The Coming Conclave, by Christopher Bellitto.

Radio Program – Sundays at 2:00pm, starting on February 22nd, Bishop Lori will be interviewed on “Ask the Bishop.”

Joe noted that on February 27th, the National Review Board will publish its overview of the sex scandal and will include figures for each diocese in the USA in terms of abusive priests, victims and amounts of payments to victims. In our Diocese of Bridgeport, there have been 23 priest offenders, 67 victims, and \$37,700,000 paid to victims to date. Very recently, a seminarian has been dismissed upon being accused of sexually molesting a 16-year old girl. The report will also include a study of why this scandal has happened.

Catharine Henningsen, tonight's speaker – Joe introduced Catharine Henningsen, a VOTF member and former editor of “The American Catholic,” and founder of SALT, an independent Catholic journal of opinion. Her topic tonight is “The Second Wave of Abuse: The Fate of our Accused Priests.” Through extensive research into Canon Law and interviews with Canon lawyers and accused priests, Ms. Henningsen presented another view of the results of some bishops' handling and mishandling of accused priest abusers. She emphasized that in most cases, when priests have been accused of abuse, they are found to be guilty after extensive investigations. But in several cited cases, accused priests have been removed and sent to places unknown with little means of support – without due process to which they are entitled under the Code of Canon Law. In these particular cases, their files have been sent to Rome for much delayed reviews without a preliminary lay board review.

Ms. Henningsen also stressed the fact that if a truly impartial lay board is to review cases, the members should be selected by the laity whom they represent, not the bishops by whom they may be influenced.

She stated that accused priests should know their rights and the prescribed procedure to be followed, including being given a written description of the allegations signed by and in the presence of a Notary Public. After reviewing this document, the priests should then be allowed to return to answer these allegations. Right now, the priests can do nothing to clear their names. Canon Law states that 1) the priests should also receive their salaries and full benefits; and 2) the dioceses should pay their legal fees and expenses. Adherence

to these two laws almost never happens. Furthermore, priests are threatened to resign or lose all financial help. Once signed, the waiver also relinquishes the priest's right to confidentiality.

While cases are pending, the dioceses may enter into a settlement with the alleged victims, even when the priest has not admitted guilt. Some of these accused priests are being blindsided by their bishops, who can apply to have the priests laicized without their approval.

We should be demanding to know what is happening to our priests. Who is watching out for them? Is there a policy for priests published on the website? Can the accused priest find out?

In the Question/Answer period following her talk, Ms. Henningsen told of specific cases in the Diocese of Bridgeport where three pastors were removed because one man alleged that all three had sexually abused him when he was 15 years old. There was no involvement of a review board, who had questions about the accuser; the charges were sent directly to Rome by the bishop, who overruled the board. The accuser, himself, had been accused of sexual abuse. Canon lawyers are trying to develop a better system – right now, the priest does not go to his own trial; his documents go to trial for him.

Ms. Henningsen commented that, while we know that there have been 50 cases of suicide by priests in the USA, we all agree that we don't want guilty priests going free, but we also don't want a church that contributes to despair.

Rev. Christopher Walsh, who was present as a diocesan observer, brought up another matter about which people from S.N.A.P. and VOTF have made objections. The case in question is about a pastor who was accused by at least two, possibly three, women who claim to have been sexually molested by him when they were in their mid teens. This pastor remains in ministry. Fr. Walsh stated that a review board decided that there was not sufficient evidence to remove him. Several people present contradicted this version of what happened, and reported that the husband of one of the alleged victims stated so in a very detailed letter to the CT Post. It was also reported that the victims were paid a settlement even though there was no admission of guilt.

While he connected the aforementioned issue with a totally different effort by S.N.A.P., with the help of VOTF, to encourage the reporting of abuse to authorities, on one occasion at St. Augustine Church, Bridgeport, Fr. Walsh expressed his view that VOTF's stance was hypocritical.

The final remark of the evening, made by Sheila Rietano, expressed VOTF's feelings. She spoke of our many futile efforts to communicate with Bishop Lori and our outrage over the unmet needs of victims. She said, "To be called hypocritical for that feels wrong."

Respectfully submitted,

Gloria Seymour, Recording Secretary

NEXT MEETING – THURSDAY, MARCH 4th – Congregational Church on the Green