

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL
IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT
March 4, 2004
Congregational Church on the Green

The meeting opened with a Lenten prayer.

Joe O'Callaghan, Chairman, welcomed the gathering of fifty-plus and asked for a show of hands of all present who are actively involved in their parishes as volunteers. Almost 100% responded. He reminded the group of our bishop's unjust ban on meeting on church property, while a recent local parish's Renew Program scheduled, on church property, speakers from the Jewish and Protestant faiths to give presentations.

Joe introduced Gerald Renner, co-author with Jason Berry, of VOWS OF SILENCE. He spoke briefly about the book which is available for purchase and signing at the end of tonight's meeting, and also at Border's in Norwalk on March 14th at 3:00pm.

Treasurer's Report – In Mary Jane Range's absence, Joe reported a balance of \$24,651.64, with a Voice of Compassion Fund balance of \$245. He advised that VOC contributions are most welcome in order for us to make donations similar to last year's in the total amount of \$10,000. Additional information will be forthcoming.

New York Times Ad/Petition – This ad was published on February 29th, asking the faithful to sign a petition 1) to ask the Pope to meet with victims/survivors, 2) to ask the Pope to hold the bishops responsible, to accept resignations, and call for resignations where appropriate, and 3) to ask each U.S. bishop to disclose names of priest-abusers. Petitions may be signed online at www.votf.org or, for those without computers, forms are available tonight.

Elections-Officers and Board Members – VOTF Bridgeport elections will take place in May. Nomination forms are available tonight. Please indicate nominations for specific Officers (5) and Board Members (10). Two of the current officers have indicated their decisions not to seek/hold office next year: the offices of Treasurer and Chairman. The Board has divided the current duties of the office of Chairman into several categories which will be served by other members of the Board; specifically, Membership, Program, Meeting Sites, Publicity/Press Releases, Media Respondent, Chairperson of Saturday Session in May, Oversee Committees on 3 Goals. Self-nominations will be appreciated by those willing to share their talents. Nominations will close at the monthly meeting on April 1st. Also, they may be mailed to Jim Alvord, 19 Knob Hill Road, Norwalk 06851.

Next Meeting, April 1st – Landa Mauriello-Vernon, Connecticut SNAP Chairperson, will speak on survivors. David Cerulli, who spoke here previously, will introduce her. **THIS MEETING WILL BE HELD AT THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN STAMFORD.** Directions will be posted on our website, www.votfbpt.org.

May 1st Conference at Fairfield University – AM Keynote: David O'Brien, Director, Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture, College of the Holy Cross; PM, Session #1 – Sexual Abuse – Landa Mauriello-Vernon and others; Session #2 – Governance and Accountability – David Gibson, author, THE COMING CATHOLIC CHURCH: HOW THE FAITHFUL ARE SHAPING A NEW AMERICAN CATHOLICISM, and Bruce Russett, Professor of International Relations, Yale University, co-editor, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

John Jay Report (statistics) & Analysis by National Review Board - Joe reviewed the National statistics: 4,392 priest-abusers, or 4% of all priests; 10,667 victims; a cost of \$572,000,000. Many feel that the amount is much higher, as is the number of victims. We are told that parishioners are not paying the cost, that the cost is covered by insurance and the sale of church property. However, parishioners do pay the insurance premiums and have paid for the properties being sold. Neither of these amounts appear as line items on financial reports. Noted in the Analysis was the fact that there was not found a single written statement by any bishop of his outrage over the crisis. This is a tragic period in the Catholic Church which has brought shame on all of us.

In response, Bill O'Sullivan, a member, commented on his letter to THE HOUR in answer to Fr. Walsh's charge of hypocrisy at last month's meeting. He stated that 4% of priest-abusers translates to one out of twenty-five priests. He felt there were too many who knew of the abuses who let it all happen. He urged every parish to schedule at least one mass during Lent expressly for the victims. This suggestion was discussed at the VOTF Board meeting and a letter will be sent to Bishop Lori endorsing this suggestion.

Collection – at this point, a basket was passed for our donation to the good people at the Congregational Church, thanking them for their hospitality.

Speaker for the evening, Svea Fraser – Joe introduced our speaker for the evening, who is one of the founders of VOTF. Her topic, "In Honor of Good Priests," reflects her years of study and current committee work on building support for good priests. She received a masters of divinity from Blessed John XXIII National Seminary and was the first female Catholic chaplain at Wellesley College.

Ms. Fraser presented a review of the documents of Vatican II which focus on renewal, encouraging active lay participation in the liturgy, and which sees the Church as the People of God, who reveals Himself in love. The documents tell us that the laity derive the right and duty assigned to the apostolate by Christ himself.

She cited some of the events since Vatican II, most notably the work of the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, who developed a plan for dialogue between liberal and conservative Catholics called Common Ground, in which a variety of problems facing the Church could be discussed. Unfortunately this plan was met with criticism by the hierarchy who were threatened by it and viewed it as anti-doctrinal. They sought answers first, with no dialogue.

“It is essential,” she said, “to have dialogue between pastors, bishops and lay people in order to restore trust in the Church.” “And lay people need to rethink their positions toward priests.” This is accomplished, not just by agreeing with a homily a priest gives, but also by challenging priests when we think their homilies miss the Christian message. “In other words, treat them like the human beings they are.” Try to arrange gatherings with clergy and laity for dialogue.

A question and answer period followed. Reference was made to Andrew Greeley’s column in the New York Times, in which he wrote that many priests do not do their jobs well and lay people don’t help their priests by not discussing their religious problems with their priests. Ms. Fraser answered that we can only change ourselves, and that we should consider ourselves as “a community of pilgrims who will show the way.”

She also felt that fear keeps priests from coming forward, but there have been groups of priests around the country who have been very brave in making their observations known. She noted that we should keep all priests in our prayers, even those accused of abuse.

The subject of the bishop’s ban on our meeting in our churches was brought up. Joe answered that we were first told that the reason was because of our connection with Boston VOTF; now we are told that our goals are not clear. He also said that even SNAP, who wanted to put notices in church bulletins encouraging victims to come forward, were denied space.

The meeting closed with prayer.

Respectfully submitted,

Gloria Seymour, Recording Secretary

NEXT MEETING – April 1st – 7:30pm – Congregational Church, STAMFORD
(directions will be posted on website)