

9/7/07 - Attorney: Lawmakers should review parish finances

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NORWALK — The members of the 381 Roman Catholic parishes in Connecticut annually contribute \$155 million to those institutions, but there is no authority in this state that governs the use or misuse of that money.

"The Attorney General of Connecticut needs to get involved in making sure that that Roman Catholic parishes handling their finances correctly," attorney Thomas L. Gallagher of Greenwich told the Voice of the Faithful of the Bridgeport Diocese Thursday night in the First Congregational Church on the Green.

"This has nothing to do with theology, but very much to do with the proper handling of moneys under the Religious Corporation Act," he said.

"Problem is that the finances of the Catholic churches in this state and elsewhere are run according to Roman and not American law. One person, the pastor or the bishop, is given sole authority to make all decisions. That is a Roman concept, not an American one."

The attorney suggested that such a setup in itself is at the base of the financial scandals that have shaken the church in recent years.

"The Connecticut General Assembly needs to revisit the Religious Corporation Act in this state with an eye toward improving the law and governance structures," he stated, noting that the Connecticut law hasn't been reviewed since 1969.

"There subsections in that law that relate specifically and only to the various religions practiced in the state. There is no general provision that would bring them all under the same umbrella of authority. There exists a dire need to improve and strengthen the law somewhat like the Sarbanes-Oxley Law was strengthened recently in response to the Tyco and other corporate scandals."

Such a legislative review in Gallagher's eyes would give parishioners a real say in the governance of their own communities. Such changes would make the bishop, the pastor, and the parishioners mutually responsible for the parishes. This would also extend to church property.

He suggested that the recent drop in church attendance from 70 to 30 percent of all Roman Catholics in the state might be reversed if the laity felt more responsibility toward the maintenance and operation of their churches.

A native of Syracuse and a graduate of Catholic University and Catholic University Law School, Gallagher was employed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops before joining a Wall Street law firm. He is currently developing "Wake Up!" a media company offering short audio messages concerning wellness, inspiration, and prayer.

After his talk, the VOTF members made plans for their multi-faceted campaigns this year on various aspects of church governance. The organization will also look into the support of priests of integrity and victims of priestly abuse. Three diocesan priests have attended VOTF meetings, but in almost every case anonymously.