

12-7-07 - Timid Women Don't Make History – Report of VOTF Meeting 12-6-07

Francis X. Fay, THE HOUR

That might well have been the title of a talk given to the Fairfield County Voice of the Faithful on Thursday night by Angela Bonavoglia, author of "Good Catholic Girls: How Women are Leading the Fight to Change the Church."

"The voice of women must gain greater expression in the (Roman Catholic) Church, if it is to survive the current shortage of ordained male priests and provide the services expected of it," she told 50 members in the First Congregational Church on the Green, the majority of them women.

The native of Scranton, Pa., who narrowly escaped sexual abuse by an aged priest during confession as a 22-year-old woman, which caused her to leave the church for a period, said that since her return, she has been working diligently to gain women's rightful position of equality in the church.

"We have a long way to go to reach the position women held in the church in the Third Century, but we must continue to work for it," she said.

The freelance journalist, now based in Westchester (N.Y.) County, shared some of her research on women's roles in the early church when they held positions of authority well beyond the ranks of priests. She spoke of a female bishop of that earlier period whose feminine name was changed by the male church hierarchy over time to the masculine gender.

She told of courageous women who have challenged church authority in more recent times and have gained ordination in ceremonies that have had to be conducted in surreptitious fashion.

Bonavoglia also paid tribute to the few courageous male priests who have supported the women's movement in the church.

"We know many more priests, bishops and members of the church hierarchy support the idea of women in significant church leadership, but they don't speak out because they are fearful of retaliation," she said.

Joanne Bray, a psychiatric counselor based in Bridgeport, and a member of the VOTF board, backed up the main speaker with the story of a courageous nun of the Benedictine order who was threatened with excommunication from the church for speaking to a conference in Ireland about women in leadership roles.

"The 300 of us women who attended the conference were also threatened with the same action," Bray said. However, it didn't come to pass, and the women have been emboldened to press on.

Peggie Thorp, a Bostonian founder of VOTF, editor of "In the Vineyard," a national monthly newsletter, and a student at the Jesuit Seminary in Weston, Mass., also spoke briefly.

She revealed a new resolution proposed by the VOTF national board that will be coming up for a vote among all members in the not too distant future, to wit: "Voice of the Faithful calls for a church-wide re-examination and reform of the role of women in Church ministry and in the governance of the church."