

If some media stories about local Roman Catholic Church affairs did not deal with tragic events or sacred ground, they might seem absurdly humorous at times by showing the grudging reluctance of diocesan officials to embrace modern principles of governance. Certainly reports in 2007 of continuing sexual abuse of youth in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Australia and Italy for which church officials are held accountable have showed church hierarchy to be less than open, accountable or transparent in their processes and in using their public voice. Significant public trust and authority continue to be lost by church officials.

During the past month, the Connecticut Post focused on the disrepair of an early Bridgeport Catholic burial ground, part of the St. Augustine Cathedral property. Early Irish congregants buried there have been lost to current memory by the slow and steady effects of weathering and steward's inattention to changes on the property as well as a loss of official records. Headstones have fallen and become buried by inches of soil over 30, 50 or 100 years, while family generations have passed and/or moved to other neighborhoods. What does perpetual care mean in Catholic cemeteries today?

When concerned readers have volunteered to assist current Catholic cemetery management, they have been discouraged. A letter to the editor by Ray Capo, director of cemeteries in the diocese, indicated that volunteers need not apply because of the substantial liability involved.

An initial response like this is not a surprise. However, were Mr. Capo and other diocesan officials to recognize that there are multiple Habitat for Humanity residences in Bridgeport built with the hands, help and giving hearts of Catholic parish volunteers, they would know that there is an alternative. Habitat liabilities were practically handled through waivers signed by the volunteers. The Post reported in a follow-up story that volunteers are now participating, digging in and finding historic headstones and helping history come to light once again as well as routine cemetery maintenance. When the initial Post article, reporting the poor conditions at St. Augustine's Cemetery, was printed, I overheard a comment from a reader who said, "The dead don't donate!" Realistically speaking, it may be difficult for Catholic cemeteries to sell new plots involving perpetual care while a story like this stays on the front pages.

And so it goes with other stories that have caused Bishop William E. Lori as leader of the Diocese of Bridgeport to appear in news stories during his tenure. The financial revelations involving multimillion dollar losses in Darien and Greenwich parishes in 2006 and 2007 have been disturbing to the parishes in particular and to charitable Catholics in general. Years of clergy financial mismanagement have led in one of these cases to a federal fraud indictment, a plea agreement and upcoming sentencing for a priest, who was a former pastor.

Subsequently this year the diocese has directed each pastor/parish to appoint and maintain a parish financial council. This practice and process is something that has been Church Law for decades. In most parishes the law has been ignored by most clergy and unknown to most people in the pews. It remains to be seen whether this newly emphasized governance practice will strengthen the practical role of laypersons in responsibility for their community of worship. Time will tell whether the mission and purpose of each parish community will be reflected in the way funds are expended and whether the people in the pews will find sufficient information and representation provided to resume charitable giving where trust has been badly shaken.

A major cover-up or "information entombment" continues in the Diocese of Bridgeport as hundreds of thousands of dollars for legal representation are spent over time by Bishop Lori. He is endeavoring to protect the testimony regarding the actions and records of a former bishop and other church officials from seeing the light of day.

In this case the testimony and actions occurred before Bishop Lori's tenure. Yet Bishop Lori authorizes the continuing appeals and continuing legal expense paid for by the people in the pews, past and present, to keep Connecticut court files sealed in the matter of depositions from Bishop Edward Egan and others for a trial that never took place more than 10 years ago. The New York Times, Washington Post, Hartford Courant and Boston Globe have attempted to unearth these records. One year ago the files reached a status only 20 days before

becoming open to the public. The ruling Superior Court judge saw no adverse consequence in the release of church official pretrial testimony for a trial that did not and would never take place. He also saw a public benefit from revelations as to how diocesan officials had handled the clerical abusers throughout the years that resulted in over \$40 million of financial settlements thus far.

The Diocese of Bridgeport appealed the court decision once again just before Christmas 2006. We see babies born every day. Senior citizens likewise pass and are buried. Spring sowing and fall harvesting still take place as the years pass. And changing and improved stewardship of businesses, government offices, not-for-profit organizations and even churches is increasingly expected by all people.

Perhaps Bishop Lori, as leader of the Diocese of Bridgeport, will help unearth the God-given gifts of the 460,000 Catholics in his territory and let them become revealed and flourish through participation of faithful Catholics in modern church operating structures. American Catholics have had a lifetime of civic practice electing their representatives and personally running for important public offices in open, accountable and transparent processes. Give them a full chance to assist the hierarchy and others ordained to maintain and grow parish and diocesan activities in the 21st century. Don't keep the gifts and stories secret or buried!

John Marshall Lee is chairman of the Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport