

Report for the Year 2002-2003

Origin of the Affiliates at St. Jerome, Norwalk, and St. Paul, Greenwich

Conference at Fairfield University in May 2002. We have come a long way since our tentative beginnings last June. Last May twelve of us from St. Jerome Parish in Norwalk attended a conference held by Paul Lakeland and Nancy Dallavalle, professors of Religious Studies at Fairfield University concerning the crisis in the Church. Inspired by their words and ideas and attentive to the development of Voice of the Faithful in Boston, we decided to organize an affiliated chapter at St. Jerome Parish in Norwalk. From the beginning we welcomed parishioners from several other parishes in mid-Fairfield County.

The St. Jerome Affiliate. We did so with the knowledge and approval of our pastor, Fr. David Blanchfield, and invited parishioners to attend a general meeting. Immediately someone contacted the chancery in Boston to be told that Cardinal Law did not approve of VOTF in any way. At meetings of the priests of the diocese the question of VOTF was raised and Bishop Lori declared that VOTF was not in communion with him and did not have a proper ecclesiology.

Invitation to Bishop Lori. At our parish general meeting in June we drew up a letter to Bishop Lori explaining our plan and our desire to collaborate with him and the priests of the diocese in restoring the image of the Church, so badly tarnished by this scandal. We invited him to meet with us.

The VOTF National Convention in July. In July Jim Alvord and Joe O'Callaghan attended the VOTF national convention in Boston and came home energized and determined to press on.

The St. Paul Affiliate. Tom and Cathy Malarkey also attended the convention, though we did not meet at that time. They too decided to organize another affiliate of VOTF at St. Paul Church in Greenwich, drawing from lower Fairfield County and upper Westchester County in New York.

The Banning by Bishop Lori. Meeting with Bishop Lori's Representatives. Bishop Lori has yet to respond to our June letter or to any of the other letters that we have sent him over the year. He did delegate Monsignor Peter Cullen and Fr. Chris Walsh to meet with a group of us on August 12, but rather than dialogue, we discovered that the sole purpose of the meeting was to read the bishop's denunciation of VOTF and his prohibition of our meeting in our parish. On the next day August 13 he published that statement. He also required Fr. Blanchfield to make a statement from the pulpit supporting the bishop's position.

Other Venues. After much debate we decided to seek other venues for our meetings. We are much indebted to the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk and to Christ Episcopal Church in Greenwich for their warm hospitality and permission to hold our monthly meetings there.

Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport. Because people from many different parishes came to our meetings we decided to call ourselves Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of

Bridgeport, with that serving as an umbrella to bring together any and all affiliates. Over the last year we have grown from a dozen or so to over two hundred faithful Catholics drawn from thirty-five parishes.

Our Year's Program

Reflection on Lumen Gentium. Despite Bishop Lori's repudiation of the hand we extended to him to help in restoring the good image of the Church, we have done many things. We have studied Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, with particular attention to the first four chapters on The Mystery of the Church; The People of God; The Hierarchical Structure of the Church; and The Laity.

Reflection on the Crisis in the Priesthood. We have listened to short presentations on the Crisis in the Priesthood with particular attention to the issues of celibacy; the aging and the shortage of priests; homosexuality in the priesthood; and the question of women priests.

Three Groups reflecting on the Three Goals. Breaking into smaller groups, we have reflected on the three goals of Voice of the Faithful, namely, to support survivors of priestly sexual abuse; to support priests of integrity; and to shape structural change in the Church in accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

Support for Survivors. We have listened to David Cerulli, Buddy Cotton, Linda Allegretti representatives of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and have offered our help to them especially in organizing a Connecticut chapter. The St. Paul Affiliate also hosted a meeting of Survivors First. We are reaching out to priests of integrity.

Incorporation. We have established a Steering Committee or Board of Directors, drawn up a constitution and by-laws and we have incorporated Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport as of February 28, 2003 to be a continuous instrument for making our views known. We are awaiting recognition from the federal government as a non-profit tax exempt organization.

Voice of Compassion - Bridgeport Fund. We have established the Voice of Compassion - Bridgeport Fund as an alternative means of financial support for the charitable and educational works of the diocese. We do all these things because we, as members of Christ's Body, the Church, are responsible for its well-being.

Conference at Fairfield University. Last month we held a conference "Crisis in the Church: A workshop for the Laity" at Fairfield University. Paul Lakeland who arranged the use of Fairfield's facilities gave us a stimulating discourse in the morning. Two successive panels were held in the afternoon. David Cerulli from SNAP, Peggy Fry, from St. Jude in Monroe, and Eleanor Craig Green of Westport spoke about their experiences of being abused by priests. Jim Butler, and Joe O'Callaghan addressed the question of the parish pastoral council and diocesan pastoral council respectively, while Mary Jane Range commented on the issue of financial accountability on the parish and diocesan levels. The day closed with a moving liturgy celebrated by Fr. Jim Bowler of the Fairfield community.

The Future

The Fear Factor. Over the last eleven or twelve months we have learned a great deal from the presentations and discussions. We have learned about the impact that FEAR has upon the Catholic people and the clergy. Fear of retribution here and now and in the next world has deterred many good people from joining us.

Determination to Work for the Renewal of the Church. Despite the efforts of Bishop Lori and his spokesman, Joseph McAleer, to blacken our reputations and to cast us as not quite orthodox, we are determined to continue our work of renewing and reforming the Church.

Joseph F. O'Callaghan
President
May 1, 2003