

May 16, 2007 - A half-measure with church finance

To the editor, The Stamford Advocate - Opinion

Bishop William Lori, Deacon William Koniers and the Diocese of Bridgeport deserve credit for developing a more substantial financial accountability plan for Catholic parishes (Greenwich Time news story, May 13). Thank God also for The Advocate, Greenwich Time, Voice of the Faithful, National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management and others for educating diocesan officials here and around the country on the necessary steps forward from the \$2 billion sexual abuse debacle, and now, the multimillion-dollar priest-embezzlement scandals.

While the diocese's newly announced six-step program is "plain vanilla" in substance, at least 25 years late in coming and drawing a big yawn from those in the real world, the steps are nonetheless a positive development in so far as they go. (Today's accounting "reviews" are hemispheres apart from audits with unqualified accounting firm opinions, but better than the status quo.)

The deep-seated and fatal impediment from a civil law perspective, however, remains unreformed: The Catholic parish corporate governance model is intrinsically disordered.

The state's non-stock corporation act and the religious corporation act have embedded all civil law authority, de facto, in the lap of the priest-pastor and, ultimately, the bishop. This lusty extravagance of state law being placed in the hands of a single person is a relic from the 1950s. This governance model can hardly be found in any other religious or secular charity created under state law.

Worse still, we in our local churches lack the moral courage to publicly face this reality and make concrete and appropriate changes through state law.

Until that happens, all the talk about stewardship rings hollow, as no reasonable person would ever place all fiduciary duties in the hands of a single person. It is imprudent, unjust and in plain contradiction of even the broadest sense of the term "stewardship."

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