

10-1-07 - Pastor is named a 'Priest of Integrity': Stanbery honored for speaking out  
By JOE VARDON, Toledo Blade (OH)

The Rev. Stephen Stanbery has railed against sexual abuse, parish closings, and an alleged murder cover-up involving the Catholic Church.

His fighting of these and other injustices has apparently landed him both a national award and a stern reprimand by Toledo Bishop Leonard Blair.

Father Stanbery, 57, who is the pastor of Holgate St. Mary and New Bavaria's Sacred Heart, was one of three priests from across the country picked to receive the Priest of Integrity award by Voice of the Faithful, a national organization of Catholics that works for change in the church and supports survivors of clerical sexual abuse.

In its announcement of the award winners, Voice of the Faithful said Father Stanbery has "been on a continuing crusade for integrity and transparency in his diocese since the sex scandals became apparent in 2002. He has worked tirelessly to root out the evil in the [alleged] coverup of a murder probe of a slain Catholic nun, clergy sexual abuse cases, closed parishes, and financial impropriety. He participated in the Oscar-nominated documentary Twist of Faith."

But, according to a local Catholic who is an advocate for those who have been sexually abused by priests, Father Stanbery has been silenced by Bishop Blair for publicly questioning the Toledo diocese's top clergyman on the church's scandals.

Claudia Vercellotti, co-coordinator of the local chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, said Bishop Blair sent Father Stanbery a letter last month that "declares that Father Stanbery will not publicly challenge the bishop."

"He's been formally admonished and censured," Ms. Vercellotti said. "The reason he's being honored nationally as a model priest is the exact same reason the hammer has come down so hard on him in Toledo."

Sally Oberski, the director of communications for the Toledo diocese, would not confirm the existence of such a letter sent by the bishop to Father Stanbery.

Ms. Oberski said Bishop Blair and the outspoken priest have had "conversations with one another, but those discussions were private and I'm not privy to what was said."

Asked for the diocese's stance on Father Stanbery's performance as a priest, Ms. Oberski said: "He's been a priest for many years. In the community he's in down there, we've heard from those who like him and we've had those who tell us they don't, not unlike any other priest."

Father Stanbery declined comment for this article, except to thank Ms. Vercellotti of SNAP for nominating him for the Priest of Integrity award.

Father Stanbery has been a priest since 1980. Most recently he spoke out against Bishop Blair for removing the Rev. Thomas Leyland, another priest who has publicly criticized the bishop, as pastor at St. Rose's in Perrysburg last summer.

But Father Stanbery has had a history of differing with Bishop Blair on public issues: in 2005, when Father Stanbery testified before Ohio lawmakers in favor of a bill that extended to 20 years, from two, the statute of limitation for filing lawsuits alleging child sexual abuse. The statutory clock for such allegations begins when the alleged victim turns 18.

The bill also included a one-year "look-back" period during which victims could file civil suits over abuses that occurred as long as 35 years ago.

Bishop Blair opposed the "look-back" amendment and urged diocesan priests to contact lawmakers and lobby for the bill's defeat.

Ms. Vercellotti said Father Stanbery also encouraged the Lucas County Prosecutor's Office to pursue a case against the bishop and the diocese for a possible cover-up of evidence in the murder case against former priest Gerald Robinson.