

VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT
Report for the Year 2003-2004

Progress of VOTF since May 2003.

During the past year VOTF in the Diocese of Bridgeport has continued to meet every month, usually in the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk. The Greenwich affiliate, under the guidance of Tom and Cathy Malarkey, continues to meet on the third Tuesday of every month at Christ Episcopal Church. We believe it is desirable to move about the diocese and for that reason we scheduled a meeting in the First Presbyterian Church in Stamford on April 1, 2004.

Our Year's Program. Each month we have invited speakers with knowledge of various aspects of the current crisis and who reflect the 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.

Speakers. Since September 2003 our speakers have included Paul Dinter, author of *The Other Side of the Altar*, who discussed his experiences as a former priest of the New York Archdiocese; Gloria Thomas of Marymount College; Jim Post, president of VOTF; Kieran Scott of Fordham University, who offered a vision of the Church in accord with the teachings of Vatican II; Catharine Henningsen, editor and publisher of *SALT: The Op-Ed Page of the Catholic Church*, whose theme was due process for priests; Svea Fraser, one of the founding members of VOTF who spoke about priests of integrity; Landa Mauriello-Vernon, the new coordinator for SNAP Connecticut, described her abuse by a nun. Margaret Roylance, another of the founding members of VOTF and head of the Structural Change Working Group will speak in June on the third goal of VOTF.

Conference on May 1, 2004 at Fairfield University. Continuing the tradition established last year we held a conference "Crisis in the Church: A workshop for the Laity" at Fairfield University on Saturday May 1 with the collaboration of members of the University's Religious Studies Department. Paul Lakeland again arranged the use of Fairfield's facilities and moderated the morning session. Registrations were about 86 but it is likely that others attended who did not register bringing the number closer to 100. The Connecticut Post reported the attendance at 200.

David O'Brien of Holy Cross College opened the day with a presentation on the growth of VOTF and the crisis in the Church. He emphasized the importance of organizing in order to bring about change. He suggested that if someone congratulates us on the good work we are doing, we have to invite that person to become a member.

The first panel in the afternoon was very moving as Landa Mauriello-Vernon and Michael Powel related their experiences as victims of sexual abuse. David Cerulli, a SNAP director, spoke about SNAP's work and the legal issues involved in dealing with sexual predators. Annette Maiberger and Sheila Rietano moderated that session.

David Gibson, author of *The Coming Catholic Church: How the Faithful are Shaping a New American Catholicism*, and Bruce Russett, co-editor of *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, spoke on Governance and Accountability in the Church. Nancy Dallavalle, professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield moderated the session.

Fr. Francis Hannafey of Fairfield's Religious Studies Department presided at the mass of healing at the close of the day. Marge Hickey and Gloria Seymour were primarily responsible for planning the liturgy.

Tri-State Activities

Tri-State Conference at Fordham University October 25, 2003. Several of our members were actively involved in planning the conference, "Being Catholic in the 21st Century: Crisis, Challenge, Opportunity," sponsored by VOTF in the Tri-State area. Many others volunteered to assist in many ways during the day.

Tri-State Forum on May 22, 2004. Several members also helped to plan the Tri-State Forum on May 22 at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan: "A Call to the Bishops: Preserve the National Review Board, Build Trust in the Church."

Financial Status

Contribution from the Wiggins Foundation. We are especially blessed because the Wiggins Foundation decided that we were using their previous gift responsibly and so made another gift in December 2003 of \$15,000. We have used this money to provide stipends for speakers, food and lodging for out-of-towners, and expenses involved in the conference at Fairfield University.

Support for Survivors. In addition to inviting Landa Mauriello-Vernon, the new SNAP Coordinator to speak at our April meeting and again at the conference on May 1, we contributed \$500 to SNAP Connecticut.

Voice of Compassion - Bridgeport Fund. Last year we established the Voice of Compassion - Bridgeport Fund as an alternative means of financial support for the charitable and educational works of the diocese. In December and early January we distributed \$10,000 (nearly the total collected) in equal amounts to Family Stages and Merton House, both of Bridgeport, The School Sisters of Notre Dame Retirement Fund in Wilton, and Queen of the Clergy Residence in Stamford.

We intend to continue the Fund this year and have set our goal at \$12,500 in the expectation that we will be able to make distributions of \$2,500 each to five charities.

Thanks to Mary Jane Range. We owe a great debt to Mary Jane Range, our treasurer for the last two years, who has guided us wisely in managing our finances.

Relations with Bishop William E. Lori

Letter to Bishop Lori, September 2003. In September 2003 we wrote to Bishop Lori noting that it was a year since he banned us from meeting in our parish churches and we asked him to reconsider his action.

Fr. Walsh as the Bishop's Representative. Earlier in the spring of 2003 the bishop let it be known that he had asked Fr. Chris Walsh, the diocesan director of vocations, to act as his liaison to VOTF. The bishop did not communicate that to us as a body. Fr. Walsh has attended most of our meetings. We invited him to speak at our meeting in August 2003.

Fr. Walsh's Response to our September Letter. Bishop Lori asked him to respond to our letter of September asking for reconsideration of the ban. Fr. Walsh replied in November, reiterating that the ban will remain in effect until such time as VOTF fully accepts the teaching of the Church on issues of sexual morality and clarifies what it means by structural change.

Meeting with Fr. Walsh December 2003. In light of that Peg Mooney of Stamford, Jim Ebzery of Greenwich, and I met with Fr. Walsh in Peg's apartment for about two hours. The conversation was amiable enough, but we did not get into the issues of structural change and sexual morality. Indeed, it seemed that there was little room for negotiation.

A Monthly Mass of Atonement. In April we wrote a letter to the bishop proposing that a monthly mass of atonement and repentance be offered in all our parish churches. The response came from the director of the Office of Safe Environments who noted that we confess our sins at the beginning of every mass. We must presume that our proposal will not be implemented.

The Future

New Blood on the Board of Directors. On the first Monday of every month, the fifteen members of the Board of Directors meet to plan our activities. Most of the members and officers have served faithfully for two years. Some of them wish to be relieved of that responsibility. It is important that others be willing to assume this responsibility.

Thanks to HealthMarket. We are most grateful to Tony Wiggins and his family who have allowed the Board to meet monthly in the offices of Health Market in Norwalk.

Election Changes. In accordance with the Constitution and By-Laws the Board of Directors approved amendments authorizing the election in May and the installation of the new Board at the first meeting in June (this year on June 28).

Geographical Representation. We believe that it is important to develop greater geographical representation on the Board. Members currently come from Norwalk, Stamford, and Greenwich, but we ought to seek representatives from other towns such as Bridgeport, Fairfield, and Danbury.

Cultivation of Small Groups in other Towns. We discussed from time to time the feasibility of moving our meetings around the diocese, but that would usually lengthen the distance for some. Norwalk does have the advantage of being centrally located off I-95 and so is easily accessible from Fairfield to Greenwich. However, people from Danbury may find that a difficult ride. We should consider how best to help a strong group to develop in Danbury. Perhaps a small team could visit Danbury and other places to speak about VOTF and encourage development of an affiliate there. Perhaps we can provide financial support for the activities of local groups.

Organization of Committees. We have also discussed the importance of developing strong committees and that each board member should lead one or another of the committees. Committees might be established to work on each of the three goals of VOTF; recruitment; program; liaison with the bishop; finance; publicity.

Program for 2004-2005. The calendar for 2004-2005 is as follows:

June 3. Margaret Roylance

July 7. Picnic

August 5

September 2. Nancy Dallavalle of Fairfield University.

October 7 [Note that Joan Chittister will give the Anne Drummeey O'Callaghan lecture at Fairfield University on Tuesday, October 5]

November 4

December 2

January 6

February 3

March 3

April 7

May 5

Where are we going? Perhaps some, if not all of us, become discouraged because of the continued ban on our meeting in our parish churches and because of the lack of any signs of significant change in the Church.

A New Catholic Reformation. I believe we must recognize that we are in the midst of a major reform movement in the Catholic Church, comparable to the era of the Reformation, several centuries ago. In some respects one can date the beginning of this new era of reform to the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Yet we must recognize that much of the work that eventually was crystallized in the documents of Vatican II had been in progress for many years before that. Indeed some of the most distinguished contributors to Vatican II were silenced before the Council. In the past forty years or so we have witnessed an attempt to reestablish the old forms and institutions that prevailed before the Council.

VOTF as a Sign of Renewal. If we wish to work for a Church that is open and honest; a Church that willingly accepts the gifts that laymen and laywomen have to offer; a Church that is open to the world and is accepting of all God's creatures, then we must continue our struggle. We have raised the standard of Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport as a sign to Catholics everywhere that we expect to reform and renew our Church. Let's keep the faith and change the Church for the better!

Joseph F. O'Callaghan
President
May 24, 2004