

6-7-08 - Voice of the Faithful: Reform needed to save church

y FRANCIS X. FAY JR, THE NORWALK HOUR

A founder of the national Voice of the Faithful organization in Boston six years ago told 45 members of the VOTF Bridgeport Chapter this week that much reform is needed to save the Roman Catholic Church.

A primary role in that reform must be wider participation by women, according to Peggy Thorp, the founding editor of "In the Vineyard," a journal of VOTF happenings.

"The profound impact of women on the evolution of the church has been erased over the past 2,000 years," she said. "There must be restoration to women of their rightful role as equally valuable members of the church. We will have to start off again at square one to inform contemporary women of their importance to the institutional history of the church and to its future."

Speaking to the topic: "A Woman's Place: Engaged and Unafraid" in the Congregational Church on the Green, she offered several instances in which the male-dominated clergy has obviated the role of women. And, in the process, revealed an extraordinary clerical ignorance of the sexual nature of mankind.

"When you hear something that doesn't sound right to your female ear during the homily of the Mass, stand right up and silently protest what you believe to be wrong," she suggested.

"There should not be talking about a man God anymore," she continued. "The voice of the church should be all inclusive."

Thorp, one of that small band who gathered in St. John Church, Wellesley, Mass., in 2002 to establish VOTF in reaction to the sexual abuse crisis in the church, has seen that movement grow to 35,000 members nationwide. She is currently a candidate for a master's degree in theology at Weston Jesuit/Boston College and a sponsor of the recently passed VOTF Women's Resolution calling for their equal representation.

Joseph O'Callaghan of St. Jerome Church, retired Fordham University professor of theological history, reviewed the recent Fairfield University talk by Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, author of a book on sexual abuse crisis: "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus."

Bishop Robinson had been chosen by the Australian bishops to draft their protocols to manage such cases in the future, an experience which promoted his writing the book. In it, he urged special attention be given three aspects of seminary formation and priestly life, namely unhealthy psychology, unhealthy ideas and unhealthy living conditions. Isolation in an all-male environment from the formative years acts as a limitation to the development of mature psycho-sexual personality, but neither celibacy nor the number of homosexual men in the priesthood are fundamental causes of the crisis.

Acknowledging that bishops of his acquaintance have been "good men," Bishop Robinson faults Pope John Paul II for failing to provide them guidance on the matter and suggests that such help would have allowed them to handle the issue entirely differently.

The cleric writes of the mystique of the priesthood that sets the clergy apart and above the people, the centralization of power since the 19th Century and the principle of papal infallibility which creates inertia inhibiting bishopric reaction without direction from Rome.

Finally, the Australian cleric urges his readers to open a dialogue with their bishops and declares: "My book does not seek to harm the church, but to create a better church."

O'Callaghan took to task the treatment of a review of the book in the Bridgeport diocesan monthly, Fairfield County Catholic, by Msgr. Christopher Walsh, noting that the negative headline on the story is not a fair assessment of it.

The Norwalk professor, who had heard Robinson speak at both Temple University in Philadelphia and at FU, concluded: "Bishop Robinson is an honest, indeed holy man, who has had the courage to speak the truth to power. He deserves our attention."

A first chairman of the diocesan VOTF, O'Callaghan thanked James Alvord of St. Jerome Church for his work as a chapter trustee during its first six years, noting that he will step down because of personal responsibilities. Dr. Richard Maiberger, a Norwalk psychiatrist, will take his place on the board. O'Callaghan

also thanked Paul Lakeland, Ph.D., an FU professor of theology, who has been a supporter of the local VOTF chapter since the outset and a co-sponsor of the annual spring conferences at the university the past six years.

John Marshall Lee of Bridgeport, chairman of the chapter, offered several critical observations on the operation of the Bridgeport diocese and announced the annual VOTF picnic will be held at 6 p.m. Tuesday, June 17, at the Fayerweather Club on Brewster Street in the Black Rock section of Bridgeport.