

# 11-2-07 - VOTF hears argument for female deacons

By FRANCIS X. FAY Jr., Hour Senior Staff Writer

NORWALK — Voice of the Faithful in the Bridgeport Diocese heard arguments Thursday night for the ordination of women as deacons in the Roman Catholic Church.

"Women were deacons before the 4th century and there is no reason they can't be again," said Phyllis Zagano, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate-in-Residence at Hofstra University.

She has been waging a one-woman campaign for such status during her career as a writer and lecturer on religion and the Roman Catholic Church.

"Christ asked all of his disciples to be ministers to each other," but who better than women are ministers to others," she told some three dozen VOTF members in the First Congregational Church on the Green.

The author or editor of 13 books on this and other aspects of theology and the church said she had recently retired as a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve after 31 years of service.

"I learned a lot about men and how they differentiate among themselves by rank and ornament," she said. "The hierarchy of the church is much the same."

She suggested there is nothing to stop any bishop from ordaining her as a deacon right now.

"When I worked for John Cardinal O'Connor in the New York Archdiocese, I asked him several times to ordain me," she said. "He would smile and say something funny, but I was serious."

However, she did credit Cardinal O'Connor with having helped in her writing about the church and theological history.

The Long Island, N.Y., resident who has been teaching "Introduction to Western Religions" and "Mysticism and Spiritual Quest" since 2002 at Hofstra, noted that it has often been a woman who is the whistleblower in exposing nefarious activities in corporations and organizations.

"They usually have less to lose because they are usually undervalued," she said.

Noting that in the early church priests and deacons were of the same rank under bishops, she suggested the creation of women deacons (not deaconesses) could give the church a renewed spirit at this juncture when it is being assailed from several sides for its shortcomings.

"Women are performing so much ministry in the church now, it is time to formalize their positions."

The speaker has authored or edited 13 books on religious studies including "Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church," winner of the First Place Book Award from the Catholic Press Association and the College Theology Society Annual Book Award ( 2002 ). She has also taught at Fordham, Boston and Yale Universities and worked as a researcher for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York.

Chairman John Lee of Bridgeport reported 28 members of the local VOTF chapter had attended the national convention two weeks ago in Providence, R.I.

"We are seeing more enthusiasm and a higher level of scholarship, awareness and knowledge in the membership," he said. "This was definitely a step up from the Indianapolis Convention two years ago."

Joseph O'Callaghan of Norwalk, a highly esteemed scholar of church history now retired from a professorial position at Fordham University, said the theme of female deacons surfaced at Indianapolis and is now being pursued on a more formal basis within the VOTF movement.

"Another thought that struck many of us was the suggestion by the Rev. Richard P. McBrien to keep trying to talk to our bishops regardless of whether or not they want to talk to us," O'Callaghan said. "If the church is to survive, everyone is going to have to talk to everyone else."

For Margaret Hickey of Norwalk, the convention provided further proof that the church laity has got to start becoming more informed and proactive instead of continuing to go along for the ride.