

## April 29, 2007 VOTF forum scrutinizes diocese finances

By [FRANCIS X. FAY Jr.](#), Hour Senior Staff Writer

The Voice of the Faithful in Fairfield County presented documentation Saturday during its annual conference at Fairfield University that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport owns real estate worth almost \$1 billion.

Attorney Daniel B. Sullivan of New Canaan, a parishioner of St. Aloysius Church and VOTF vice president, said he and a team had devoted six weeks to researching all church property in each of the 23 towns and cities in the diocese.

"You have to remember that many of these figures are based on assessments on non-taxable properties that have been owned by the diocese as far back as the 19th century, so their evaluations, even with revaluations, are usually lower than if they were made today," he told the 125 present in the Oak Room of the Barone Center for the conference on Financial Accountability in the Catholic Church. "And since they're non-taxable, assessors don't peg them at the highest possible value."

The estimate of property wealth includes cemeteries, commercial properties, vacant lands, the underlying land values upon which are located the three health centers leased to the private sector last year and Sacred Heart University which has become somewhat autonomous, he explained.

"We still haven't been told how much the diocese has realized from the health center leases," he said.

Sullivan broke down diocesan property wealth by individual parishes totaling \$514.6 million, the diocese properties worth \$20.3 million, cemeteries at \$74.4 million, the underlying health care properties at \$462.9 million, elementary schools at \$147.4 million, high schools at \$61.5 million and Sacred Heart University at \$93.4 million. He also broke it down by the six geographical vicariates into which the diocese is divided and in which, to no one's surprise, Vicariate I embracing Greenwich, Stamford and Darien has the twice the value of any other vicariate.

He gave Bishop William E. Lori credit for having instituted parish financial reforms since taking over six years ago from then-Bishop Edward M. Egan, but was critical of his failure to enforce those reforms on local parishes, citing the financial fiascoes at St. John Church in Darien and St. Michael the Archangel in Greenwich as examples.

VOTF President John Marshall Lee of Bridgeport wasn't as soft on the bishop, saying he'd communicated with him a half dozen times in the last year and received only one cursory reply. He said the bishop and other clergy had also been invited to the annual conference, but none responded including Michael Madden, the former associate pastor of St. John Church in Darien, who had been given leave by the bishop after he exposed the Rev. Jude Fay to the authorities. The audience applauded strongly at mention of Madden's name.

Lee, a Yale College graduate and successful insurance man, also called the bishop to task for not exemplifying the truly religious man, noting that he lives in a home on Daniels Farm Road in Trumbull that encompasses 8,900 square feet.

"How can he appreciate the homeless living in a home that large?" Lee asked.

Reviewing what is known about the 2004 fiscal year of the diocese, he asked: "Does a welfare expenditure of \$14 million from income of \$145 million seem right?"

Relating a recent experience as a speaker before an audience of 10,000 in Taipei, he said: "I held up these dollar bills and asked their value. The answer I was looking for? The value of money is its availability in a time of need. We live in one of the richest areas of the world, but there are people of need in Bridgeport and Stamford and even Greenwich. Wouldn't it be great if we knew our diocese is doing the best it can for those people in need, but we can't know without a more precise accounting than is being provided."

Joseph F. O'Callaghan of Norwalk, professor emeritus of medieval History at Fordham University, past president of the American Catholic Historical Association, and author of the new book "Electing Our Bishops: How the Catholic Church Should Choose its Leaders," weighed in with a scholarly look at financial management and mismanagement in the Diocese of Bridgeport.

"The right of the faithful to own church property needs to be reasserted," he said as one recommendation for reform. "The transfer of ownership to all the faithful will not only call upon the expertise of lay people in financial and administrative matters, but also enable bishops and pastors to concentrate on their primary responsibility to teach the Gospel."

A second recommendation would result in the election of all members of parish finance councils and members of the Diocesan Finance Council.

"Neither the pastor nor the bishop should have the right to make unilateral decisions concerning the use of parish or diocesan funds," he said. "The counsel and consent of the parish or diocesan finance council should be required."

O'Callaghan quoted a letter of St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in 250 A.D., to his priests and deacons to illustrate a third recommendation.

"From the beginning of my episcopate, I determined to do nothing on my private judgment without your counsel and the consent of the people," wrote St. Cyprian.

"If our bishops will follow these common sense principles, some of the disasters that have befallen the church might be avoided in the future.

Turning to Bishop Lori's recent statement that the money used to settle claims made by those abused by priests didn't come from diocesan investments or parish contributions, O'Callaghan said: "The money to fund insurance comes from parishioners. So, the bishop's assurance that none of the money from the annual bishop's appeal, parish contributions or personal contributions will be used to fund legal settlements is meaningless."

Mary Pat Fox of New York City, national VOTF president, noted the recent study by the Villanova School of Church Management which found 85 percent of 174 participating dioceses indicated an experience with some level of embezzlement.

"It is critical that we realize it is up to us, the laity, to fix this," she said. "We must take responsibility for what we are funding, be it a soup kitchen or a priest's lavish lifestyle.

She urged members to promote greater volunteerism among parishioners, particularly in taking part in the collection process.

"To gain financial stability in the church, we must start with the collections and this includes the poor box. There is no estimate of how much money disappears each year in the Catholic Church because much of it disappears prior to ever being counted, since the collection baskets and poor boxes are cash businesses."

She suggested all church contributions be by check and that parishioners should demand audited financials at the diocesan level and that people with good financial skills be required for the finance councils.

Fox also took issue with Cardinal Egan's response to a New York Times reporter in a recent issue where he answered a query on financial transparency by saying: "We are transparent to the best possible people."

"That's the same arrogance that moved abusive priests from one parish to another in the Bridgeport Diocese and announces the next crisis of secrecy in the church, a financial crisis."

Fox applauded the VOTF Fund of compassion in which members donate to it instead of to the bishop's annual appeal and then determine the charities to which it is distributed.

The smoothness of the conference was in no small measure due to Paul Lakeland, Aloysius P. Kelley, S.J., Chair of Catholic Studies at FU. Logistics were handled by James Alvord, Robert Mulligan and Margaret Hickey and Gloria Seymour, all of St. Jerome Church.