

Vigilance, now more than ever

Voice of the Faithful leader urges Catholics to push church leaders to admit culpability in clergy molestations

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April 14, 2004

[www.newsday.com/news/local/longisland/ny-livotf0414,0,2889527.story?coll=ny-li-aspn-headlines](http://www.newsday.com/news/local/longisland/ny-livotf0414,0,2889527.story?coll=ny-li-aspn-headlines)

Speaking for the first time on Long Island Tuesday night, James Post, national president of Voice of the Faithful, urged Catholics to remain vigilant in monitoring the church's response to the priest sex abuse scandal and to continue to hold its leaders accountable.

"The reason why this continues to be so important to us now is that if we don't solve this problem and do it right, we don't have a chance of repairing all of the other issues swirling around in the church," he said. "The clergy's sexual abuse crisis is where we have to reclaim the moral integrity of the church that has been lost these last few years."

Post said it was "immoral" for Bishop William Murphy to refuse to let local Voice of the Faithful groups meet on church property. His visit comes as the local group and the leader of the Diocese of Rockville Centre are in preliminary discussions about lifting the ban. In January, recognition of the group was one of the top demands by priests of the diocese when Murphy met with them to hear their grievances. A month later, the bishop agreed to appoint a liaison committee of priests to meet with local VOTF leaders.

Another of Post's contentions was that Murphy, who was the second in command in Boston from 1993 until 2001, when he was appointed head of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, "misrepresented the truth about abusive priests."

Murphy has denied any wrongdoing. A spokesman was unavailable to comment Tuesday night.

Post, who used to be a lay minister in the Wellesley, Mass., parish of St. John the Evangelist when Murphy served there, said members in Boston have a lot of sympathy for Long Island Catholics.

"I know Bishop Murphy so I understand the problems you have. I understand your pain," said Post, who is a professor of management at Boston University.

The founder of the grassroots lay group, which sprung up in Boston in 2002 after the priest sex abuse scandal broke, made his remarks to about 220 people at a VOTF meeting at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset.

Nationwide, the group now has 30,000 members, including 1,800 in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, which makes it the single largest affiliate group.

Since the abuse scandal became public two years ago, Post said the church has made progress in dealing with survivors and troubled priests. But he said more work needed to be done in the "historic struggle to get the Catholic church back to representing Gospel values."

To move forward, Post said local VOTF members should challenge the diocese's position of keeping many millions of dollars as general reserved funds instead of using it for education and social services programs. "These are not unreasonable questions," said Post, adding that this is money parishioners have given for the work of the church.

Dan Bartley, a co-director of the local group, said the branch wants to expand its talks with Murphy beyond using church property to other issues such as oversight of church finances.

Karen Montalbano, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said officials are waiting for a response from VOTF about the details before finalizing plans for a meeting.

Meanwhile, after their own analysis, the local lay group Tuesday posted on its Web site an analysis of the findings of Laura Ahearn, executive director of Parents for Megan's Law, and Murphy's response to her charges. Ahearn recently issued a report contending that while Murphy was the vicar general in Boston, he sheltered a few priests with credible allegations against them, failed to notify police of abuse incidents of which he was aware and was indifferent to the cases of some priests who were a danger to young people.

The group said Murphy's response to Ahearn's charges was often incorrect, misleading or contradicted by the evidence.