

Voice of Faithful calls for diocese financial control

BY MARTIN C. EVANS

Newsday Staff Writer

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More than 100 members of the Long Island chapter of Voice of the Faithful Tuesday marched from St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre to the diocesan offices three blocks away to call for the creation of an outside "finance council" to watch over the diocese's finances.

Members of the group presented a representative of Rockville Centre Bishop William Murphy with what they said were 7,000 signatures asking the diocese to account for what Voice of the Faithful, a Catholic lay reform group, said is a \$188-million cash reserve held by the diocese. They said the funds should "be put to good use in the community."

The group, which formed four years ago to confront church officials in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal involving Catholic priests, said input from parishioners is needed to ensure that donations are well spent.

Sean Dolan, a spokesman for Murphy, said the reserve totals only \$33.3 million -- not \$188 million as estimated by Voice of the Faithful. He said the money provides a cushion against unforeseen expenditures as well as investment income needed to maintain services without depleting the church's finances. He said the organization's contention that the diocese could operate with a smaller reserve indicated a lack of understanding of how churches are financed.

But group members said their number, which they said was derived from diocesan records, was accurate. "There is an honest reserve, and then there is hoarding; this is hoarding," said Penny Duggan of Massapequa. "There are parishes that are very poor. We're asking the bishop to share with these parishes."

The diocese, the administrative body overseeing Long Island's 134 Roman Catholic parishes, provides operating funds for 76 schools, five hospitals and three cemeteries, Dolan said. Its charitable programs provide services for 59,000 people at 60 sites across Long Island.

"The truth of the matter is the diocese relies on money generated from investments to fund its ministry," Dolan said. "If we took money out, it would provide a short-term gain but would decimate the diocese. Spending down the reserve would force the diocese to reduce the number of programs it provides."

Dolan also said the diocese currently receives financial advice from a nine-member council, whose members include Peter Quick, a former president of the American Stock Exchange, and Kenneth Langone, a co-founder of Home Depot.

Voice of the Faithful co-chairman Dan Bartley said that although the bishop's panel has helped maximize the church's financial portfolio, it has not been responsive to the needs of local parishes and communities.

He said the church could use money from its reserves to boost low teacher salaries in Catholic schools, increase funding for parishes in lower-income communities or secure retirement benefits for local priests and nuns.

"... Since it's the faith community that donates money in the first place, that community should have some say," Bartley said. "Long Island still has lots of poor people. Why not support these poor parishes?"