

Catholics urged to take charge

National leader applauds local efforts, calls for more

By BETH MILLER, The News Journal (DE), Thursday, January 18, 2007

BETHANY BEACH -- Five years after child sexual abuse by priests became a national scandal, many Catholics still do not believe the abuses occurred, the president of Voice of the Faithful, a national lay Catholic reform group, said Wednesday night.

Speaking to about 70 members at a meeting of the South Coastal chapter of Voice of the Faithful, New Yorker Mary Pat Fox applauded the efforts of Delaware's two chapters to promote awareness, legislative change and lay participation.

Though the scandal caused many to leave the church, "those who have joined Voice of the Faithful said, 'This is my church. We are the church.' We can't pretend it didn't happen and go on as we did before. This must change."

Voice of the Faithful was formed in Massachusetts in response to the child sexual abuse scandal that emerged in 2002. Five years ago this month, The Boston Globe first published its massive report on how abusive priests were handled by the church, and revealed a labyrinthine pattern of secrecy and transfers used to keep the problem as quiet as possible. The group now has more than 100 affiliates throughout the United States and in Ireland, Australia and Canada..

"I want to see changes in the church, and I want to see them made peacefully," said Virginia Nee, a member of St. Ann parish in Bethany Beach, who attended Wednesday's meeting with her husband, Mike.

Mike Nee said he believes the bishops must be held accountable for the way things were handled. "We're only addressing half the problem," he said.

Fox, who works in human resources for a financial services firm, called for greater accountability, transparency and lay participation.

"We're no longer the uneducated members, sitting in the pews, willing to pray, pay and obey. We have educated ourselves and matured as Christians and Catholics."

She is distressed that so few Catholics have voiced outrage after a recent Villanova University report showed that 85 percent of dioceses in the United States have experienced some level of embezzlement. Though some believe that sexual abuse settlements are the reason four dioceses have gone bankrupt in the U.S., Fox said she disagrees because those damages are paid with insurance money.

She applauded efforts to change statutes of limitations for child sexual abuse in Delaware, an effort Voice of the Faithful supported in the General Assembly here last year. A similar effort is expected this spring.

She also commended Diocese of Wilmington Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli for efforts to increase lay participation in the southern part of the diocese, where he has established the Ocean Deanery Council, including representatives of eight parishes.

But she was surprised to learn that the Voice of the Faithful still was not permitted to meet on church property. Many other dioceses have discontinued such bans, she said.

When Saltarelli met with John Sullivan and other members of the Coastal Delmarva chapter in 2005, the group asked for a council that would allow laymen to provide more input. This year, at Saltarelli's direction, the Ocean Deanery Council was established. It is the only such council in the diocese, which includes all of Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Maryland -- about 220,000 Catholics.

"The bishop recognized that perhaps some of these folks made a valid point, that some of the laity in the southern part of the diocese weren't having their voices heard," said diocese spokesman Robert G. Krebs.

One member of Voice of the Faithful is a member of that new council, Sullivan said. In addition, the council has a representative on the Diocesan Pastoral Council, giving laymen a voice at that level of church governance. "It is a structural change that is very good for the laity to participate in," Sullivan said. "We are most grateful."