

During the scandal that erupted over the Rev. Jude Fay, who is accused of stealing \$1.4 million from St. John's Church in Darien to finance a luxurious lifestyle for himself and his reputed boyfriend, Advocate editor Angela Carella started receiving calls from people who wanted to talk about what they considered a serious moral issue.

Some felt that even though the diocese had dealt with the financial improprieties, not enough was done to address the fact that Fay had ostensibly violated his vows as a priest.

Carella began working on a story that examined the concerns of these parishioners, some of whom had written to Bishop William Lori and to the papal nuncio, the Vatican's representative in the United States. She also interviewed church experts on celibacy, and in the pursuit of a balanced and fair account, she contacted the diocese and we tried to schedule an interview with Bishop Lori. We were asked to submit our questions in advance, and complied by sending the following list a day before the interview:

1. In light of the Father Fay scandal, we have reason to believe a growing number of parishioners are concerned whether the diocese is effectively dealing with priests who violate their vows of celibacy. How do you deal with such complaints?

2. Is there a process? How does it work?

(What would happen if a parishioner went to the diocese with a complaint about a priest's behavior? Who is in charge of such complaints? Would the diocese require that the parishioner have proof? If the diocese did think that a priest was sexually active, what would it do?)

(How many such complaints does the diocese receive? Are the complaints generally dismissed as rumor, or does someone speak to the priest whose behavior is questioned?)

3. How vigorously does the diocese pursue complaints against priests who violate their vows of celibacy?

4. What should have been the role of parishioners in exposing any indiscretions of Father Fay?

5. In what ways has the diocese tried to implement the Vatican's Instruction on Priestly Formation, which says the church "may not admit to the seminary and Holy Orders those who practice homosexuality, show profoundly deep-rooted homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture"?

This, of course, was to be an interview and not an inquisition, which means to say the bishop was free to answer any or all of the questions. He chose to answer none.

In a pre-emptive correspondence to parishes, diocesan spokesman Joseph McAleer characterized the questions as "condemnatory" and urged a letter-writing campaign. To our thinking, they were straightforward questions that any journalist or parishioner would, and should, ask.

The interview was subsequently canceled, and the diocese said it would instead provide a statement from Bishop Lori in today's edition of The Advocate. On several occasions during our discussions with the diocese, our reporter was accused of promoting a "witch hunt" and was told that priests who violate the vow of celibacy are not committing criminal acts. We knew that. The accusation that we were conducting a "witch hunt" was nothing more than an attempt to discredit our story about an issue of serious concern, one that can affect both homosexual and heterosexual clergy. Moreover, the diocese asked whether we were going to "name names," and we made it clear that was not our intention.

During a meeting with priests from lower Fairfield County, Bishop Lori reportedly said The Advocate was going to publish an article that was filled with "innuendo and gossip." Neither was that the case.

In his Sunday homily, one pastor condemned our story without even knowing what it said. Contrary to what he announced from the pulpit, we did not try to "coerce" the bishop. I personally talked to the bishop about giving us an interview, which I intended to take part in, and there was no "attempted coercion."

Thinking our story was going to appear last Sunday, another pastor responded prematurely and put a column in the parish bulletin and on the Web site that said: "The recent article in the Stamford Advocate requires some response. While I can't answer every point in this brief piece, I would like to address some." But the points he chose to address were not even part of our story.

He wrote: "The paper's proposed solution to the present church crisis is that clerical celibacy be made optional or abolished." Where did he get that idea? Since the very beginning of our reporting, the issue of abolishing celibacy had never even been discussed.

The essay continued: "The Advocate article used this scandal as the springboard for marshaling every unhappy group or individual, whether ideologically Left or Right, Catholic or otherwise, to give vent to their vitriol against the Catholic Church and against the priesthood in general, and Bishop Lori in particular." Wrong again. This story was a result of the many calls, e-mail and letters we received from devout practicing Catholics who love the church. Clearly, it would have been wiser if he had waited to read the story before writing his impassioned response.

Contrary to the diocese's campaign of disinformation and demagoguery, the misrepresented and maligned story, which appears on Page One of today's paper, is not filled with "innuendo and gossip." It is not a "witch hunt." And it does not "name names." It is rather a story about concerned parishioners who are looking for answers and ecclesiastical accountability and who sincerely want every one of their priests to honor his vows. This is a fair story.

And just as it would be a tragic injustice for us, as a newspaper, to impugn the reputation of many priests because of the transgressions of a few, it would be an equally tragic injustice for the diocese to imperil the reputation of the many by ignoring the transgressions of a few.

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