

3-7-08 - Former priest urges change for the church at the diocese level

By VICTORIA MACCHI, Naples News (FL)

As the final speaker of the 2008 Voice of the Faithful lecture series, former priest Eugene Kennedy touted reform by Catholic bishops as a way to address challenges within the church.

“They do whatever is expected of them to maintain the church and reinvigorate a hierarchical church ... but they are living in an age in which hierarchies no longer function,” Kennedy said.

Bishops are there to “help you to grow, not to supervise you,” he added.

The Thursday night lecture came after a tumultuous sixth season for the lecture series, in which two speakers – the Rev. Charles Curran and Kathleen Kennedy Townsend – were prohibited by the Diocese of Venice from speaking at local Catholic churches.

Voice of the Faithful, a local lay Catholic organization, didn’t submit the paperwork to the Diocese for Kennedy to speak at a local Catholic church, choosing instead to hold the event at Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church.

With about 200 attendees, Thursday night’s lecture marked the lowest attendance in the three-part series that began in February. Kennedy’s impassioned speech on the importance of change at the diocesan level, however, elicited applause throughout the two-hour event.

A former priest, Kennedy left the clergy in 1977 after 22 years to get married. He has authored several books, as well as articles and reports, on the Catholic Church.

He based much of his speech on studies he conducted in the 1960s as a professor of psychology at Loyola University in Chicago; the resulting report, which was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, was published in 1971 and indicated a lack of emotional and psychological maturity in a majority of priests.

When allegations, and convictions, of pedophilia came to light in the past decade and a half, Kennedy said during his speech that the bishops “put the emphasis on taking care of the person who had offended rather than on those who had been offended. On saving the predator rather than the one who had been preyed upon ... Our sensitivities to victims came only long afterward.”

This consequently rattled the trust between the congregation and the hierarchy, and the bishops “are the victims of a system they are trying to support because they think it’s their duty to do it.”

More than the cardinals and the Pope, Kennedy told the Daily News after the speech that the onus is on the bishops to lead changes within the church because they are local. Relying on the upper echelons of the church would only reinforce the hierarchy, he said.

In addition, he publicly criticized the Diocese of Venice’s ban on previous speakers.

“It is ironic indeed that at this time in history ... bishops should worry about whether VOF is meeting on church property or not,” he said.

Since early 2007, three VOF speakers were banned from speaking in local Catholic churches.

In a statement in early February, the Diocese explained that the decision to prohibit the speakers was based on their positions, which “contradict the church’s teachings and doctrine.”