August 9, 2007 – (OH) - Henry County priest criticizes diocese leadership
By JACK PALMER, Crescent-News (OH)

A Henry priest known for his outspokenness has openly questioned the leadership of the Catholic Diocese of Toledo in the presence of his parishioners.

Father Steve Stanbery made his remarks during five Masses last weekend at Holgate St. Mary and New Bavaria Sacred Heart churches and the Hamler St. Paul chapel.

"The situation which Father spoke about concerned the Father (Thomas) Leyland situation and his replacement at St. Rose parish (in Perrysburg), along with the cover-up by Bishop (Leonard) Blair's office concerning it," said Rick Schwiebert, who attends the Hamler chapel.

During an hour-long interview with The Crescent-News, Stanbery said his concerns about the diocese leadership were even broader than those two issues.

"I have been on a continuing crusade for integrity and transparency in this diocese, starting with the sex scandals which began under Bishop (James) Hoffman," Blair's predecessor, said Stanbery.

"Another example is the handling of the Sister (Margaret Ann) Pahl murder investigation, when police found 145 more pages than they were provided originally after executing a search warrant at the diocese office. (Father Gerald Robinson was ultimately convicted in 2006 of killing Pahl in Toledo in 1980).

Leyland, 69, retired July 1 after refusing a pastorate in another parish. The Perrysburg priest -- older brother of Detroit Tigers manager Jim Leyland -- had been critical in recent years of what he perceived to be Blair's lack of private consultation with him over readjusting the St. Rose parish boundaries.

In April, Blair assigned Father David Nuss, former diocesan director of vocations, as the new St. Rose pastor, effective July 1. However, following a July 2 meeting with Nuss, Blair appointed Father Marvin Borger to the St. Rose pastorate.

According to a diocesan statement, Nuss admitted that he had entered into a "consensual but inappropriate" relationship with a woman about his age last fall.

"What the bishop did not tell parishioners and the other priests was that this woman had suddenly lost her husband and was at a very vulnerable time in her life," said Stanbery. "That's a whole different picture. He (Nuss) could be the type of person who preys on vulnerable women, which is one form of being a sexual predator."

"Father Nuss was very repentant and Bishop Blair feels that this does not preclude him from being a pastor," countered diocese spokesman Sally Oberski, who met personally Wednesday with Blair and diocesan vicar of priests Father William Kubacki regarding Stanbery's allegations. "Father Nuss ended the relationship out of recognition it was immoral and incompatible with his priestly promise. He is now on sabbatical."

Added Oberski: "Father Nuss advised the bishop of the inappropriate relationship during a private conversation in January. The bishop had no idea in April that there would be so much turmoil at St. Rose. He thought (appointing Nuss pastor) was the right thing to do at the time."

"Bishop Blair claims Father Nuss' comments made to him in January were made as if under the seal of confession, but you cannot put something under seal of confession after the fact," said Stanbery. "The information has to actually be told under the sacrament of confession, which I highly doubt. Many people around the diocese feel that the sacrament of confession has been belittled by the bishop.

"Bishop Blair accuses me of detraction, which means to spread truth to defame a person, but he only gives part of what detraction is," added Stanbery. "It is not a sin of detraction if people have the right to know. Certainly the parishioners of St. Rose had the right to know about Father Nuss' relationship with this woman. So did the men studying to become a priest, since Father Nuss was director of vocations."

Stanbery said he spoke briefly with Blair at a diocesan meeting Tuesday at Maumee Bay State Park.

"I asked him if Father Nuss was the only priest he had to go to St. Rose," said Stanbery. "His response was, 'How long will this thing be going on'? I told him, 'Until the truth is served.' "

Regarding Leyland, Stanbery said the problem began with what he called the bishop's lack of private consultation with the Perrysburg priest over a change in the St. Rose boundaries, an issue which dates back more than two years.

"Bishops are obliged to do real consultation with priests and laity alike," said Stanbery, who admitted Leyland is his best friend in the priesthood. "When the bishop originally proposed to close St. Paul's in Hamler, he never sought my advice in any private meeting or communication."

Stanbery added that the diocese's vicar of priests (Kubacki) told him recently that he (Kubacki) has been hearing complaints from other priests about the bishop's lack of consultation.

"We find many of Father Stanbery's comments to be untrue and full of distortion," said Oberski. "For example, Father Kubacki flatly denies that he heard complaints from other priests about the consultation process.

"The diocese office has received several calls this week from parishioners regarding Father Stanbery's comments last weekend during Mass," Oberski continued. "They are very upset, but many are afraid to give their name because they are afraid of retaliation by Father Stanbery."

Oberski said the bishop wanted to apologize to Stanbery's parishioners. "They have the right to a homily (sermon) that is based on scripture and how it applies to everyday Christian life," she said.

Stanbery asserted that he had the overwhelming support of his parishioners. "All the input I have received about my comments last weekend has been positive," he stated. "I have not heard one negative comment."

When asked about his reputation as a "renegade priest" around the diocese, Stanbery responded: "I don't think I'm a renegade from Jesus Christ, who declares himself the way, the truth and the life. The bottom line is that people have the right to know the truth.

"St. Ambrose once said that the church is never served when scandal is concealed," added Stanbery. "So maybe I'm in good company with other renegades like St. Ambrose."