



## VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL™ IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

A potentially historic bill was introduced last week in the Connecticut General Assembly that, if enacted, would place control of the temporal affairs of Roman Catholic parishes in the lay members of those parishes. The bill, 1098, would amend certain sections of the existing Connecticut General Statutes dealing with the laws under which the Roman Catholic parish corporations are presently organized, to provide that the administrative and financial powers *only* of such corporations would be governed by a board of directors of between seven and thirteen lay members elected by the congregation. The proposal specifically exempts from the powers granted to the board those pertaining exclusively to religious tenets and practices, which would remain vested in the bishop and pastor. The law also provides for the reporting of suspected financial irregularities to the state's Attorney General and empowers him to represent the public interest in investigating such reports.

The Diocese of Bridgeport has issued a statement on behalf of Bishop Lori that mischaracterizes the bill as an attack on the "Roman Catholic Church and our Faith," and as a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. And in a giant leap of illogic unsupported by any facts, it characterizes the bill as "a thinly-veiled attempt to silence the Catholic Church on the important issues of the day." Of course, the bill, available at [www.cga.ct.gov/2009/TOB/S/2009SB-01098-R00-SB.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/TOB/S/2009SB-01098-R00-SB.htm), does no such thing.

The First Amendment prohibits Congress, and through the Fourteenth Amendment, the states, from, among other things, enacting laws regarding either the "establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...." Contrary to Bishop Lori's assertion, the recently introduced bill does neither; it merely seeks to amend the existing law, to which the Church has implicitly consented by incorporating thereunder, to provide that the *temporal affairs* of the parish corporations organized pursuant thereto shall be governed by a lay board of directors elected from and by the members of the parish that will be fiduciaries to both the parish corporation and the members of the congregation.

Of course, it is the past and present members of those parishes who, both historically and currently, have provided the funds to acquire, construct and maintain the temporal assets of those parishes and compensate the clergy who staff them and the diocesan offices. Those clergy, whose training is primarily in the area of theology and providing pastoral services, are often ill-equipped to manage the increasingly complex administrative and financial affairs of a parish corporation. This bill seeks to put that responsibility in the hands of those who are more likely to have those skills, or, as fiduciaries, would be responsible to hire someone who did.

Contrary to Bishop Lori's assertion, in his diocese the clergy have proven to be less than stellar stewards of its financial assets. Both Bishop Curtis, and then Bishop (now Cardinal) Egan, Bishop Lori's immediate predecessors, so mismanaged problems

relating to abuse of children by their priests that the Diocese incurred settlement costs of over \$40 million, not to mention an amount of legal and other expense that has never been disclosed. In fact, Bishop Lori himself continues to expend diocesan funds in an attempt to suppress the release of records relating to the abuse cases. On Bishop Lori's watch, we have seen the former pastor of St. John's parish in Darien sentenced to confinement in federal prison for embezzling over \$1 million, and have never heard the end of the story regarding the pastor of St. Michael's in Greenwich who was discharged for alleged financial irregularities. There were earlier instances of other financial improprieties, both in Ridgefield and at another parish in Greenwich. Given these examples of stewardship, and the lack of accountability, openness and transparency on the part of the Diocese in dealing with them, there appears to be substantial justification for enacting some of the changes embodied in Bill 1098.

Church leaders have been more than comfortable exploiting the laws of the United States and its member states in their attempts to deny or delay compensation, or even justice, to children abused by their clergy, and using those laws, such as various statutes of limitation, to attempt to insulate the Church and themselves from liability to the victims and accountability to the laity.

In another astounding non-sequitur, the Bishop takes a swipe at the Connecticut General Assembly for trying "to manage the Catholic Church" while facing a billion dollar budget deficit caused by the current economic difficulties affecting governments at every level, as well as the rest of us. He avers that the Catholic Church "lives within its means," irrespective of the fact that five dioceses in the United States have declared bankruptcy in the last several years (again, seeking protection as corporations created under and subject to those laws that the bishop so roundly condemns when they serve to protect the rights of others rather than those of the Church). He goes on to claim that the Catholic Church provides "more social, charitable and educational services than any other private institution in the State" without acknowledging that over 50% of the funds supporting those services are provided by the same state and federal governments (out of taxes levied on citizens of all faiths, or no faith at all) that he vilifies when he finds their actions less to his liking.

We urge all Catholics to reject the irrational, erroneous, illogical and biased arguments of Bishop Lori, and to attend the hearing at the Capitol in Hartford on March 11 to support Bill 1098.

We urge the bishops of Connecticut and concerned Catholics throughout the state to open a dialogue with the Judiciary Committee of the General Assembly to produce a bill that will implement best practices in the corporate governance and financial administration areas for the parishes. In that regard, we believe that the existing bill should be modified to provide that both the bishop and the pastor would be voting members of each parish corporation.

It is time for us to stand up and defend our rights as adult members of the People of God.

For more information on Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport please visit our website at [www.votfbpt.org](http://www.votfbpt.org) and our blog, Catholic Voices of Fairfield County, at [www.votfbpt.wordpress.com](http://www.votfbpt.wordpress.com).