

5-31-08 - 'Voice of the Faithful' grows beyond its origins
By Angela E. Lackey, Midland Daily News (MI)

It formed in response to the Catholic Church's priest sexual abuse scandal. It has grown as a voice for Catholics who want greater say and involvement in their church.

"The people are the church," said Harry Grether of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church and coordinator of MidMichigan Affiliate of Voice of the Faithful.

"We would just like to be recognized that we have a role to play," said Joe Schoren. Schoren is a member of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Church and the affiliate's chairman.

The Voice of the Faithful formed in 2002, "To provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church."

Blessed Sacrament started a task force related to the sexual abuse scandal after the national VOTF formed, and that group met for about one year.

"Some of us felt that it was such a healthy thing, to share our concerns," Grether said. "We somehow wanted it to continue."

Grether said several area priests encouraged him to start an area group, and in 2003, the mid-Michigan group became VOTF's 200th affiliate.

"It's a group of people who really love their faith, but that have some concerns about it," he said.

One concern is that church leaders, specifically bishops, weren't living up to their responsibilities as shepherds, or leaders.

"Shepherds. That's the way we look at our leaders, as servant leaders," Schoren said.

The VOTF's three goals are to support victims of clergy sexual abuse, to support priests of integrity, and to shape structural change within the Church.

Members work toward these goals in various ways. For example, the mid-Michigan group is working to help pass House Bill 5608. If passed, the bill basically would give anyone a 20-year-window to report clergy sexual abuse.

"What they're finding out is a lot of people can't even talk about it until they're young adults, they're so traumatized," Schoren said. "It's not just a Catholic Church problem, it's all churches. It's a cultural problem."

Both men agreed with Pope Benedict XVI's recent statements about clergy sexual abuse, in which he expressed his "shame and regrets."

"The Pope did the right thing," Schoren said. "(But) he's one person. Now it's a matter of the other bishops, if they're going to do something about the problem."

Both Midland men love their faith, and said the reforms of Vatican II encouraged them to do service and take ownership of their church.

"It's my home," Schoren said.

"I just feel a strong Christian faith is important," Grether said. He said his faith is especially important during tough times, such as when his daughter died of cancer. "I'm convinced I'm going to see her again."

"I love my faith, but I do have questions," he added.

MidMichigan VOTF meets 7 to 9 p.m. the fourth Wednesday of each month, and often has educational presentations as part of the meetings. The group typically meets at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, 3109 Swede Ave.; however, the June 25 meeting will be at St. Brigid Catholic Church, 207 Ashman St. For more information, contact Schoren at jwschoren@chartermi.net or (989) 835-4489.