

4-4-08 - Voice of Faithful plans Times ad

Norwalk Hour, By Frank Fay

Members of the Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport have contributed more than \$1,000 to the national VOTF fund that will provide a full-page advertisement in the national edition of the New York Times.

The advertisement will be timed to the April 16-20 visit to the United States of Pope Benedict XVI and will be aimed at alerting him and all Roman Catholics to what VOTF considers the dire plight of the church.

John Lee of Bridgeport, president of the group here, told the 35 members present Thursday night in the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk that more than \$50,000 in donations had been received by the national organization in an 11th hour appeal.

He and two other local VOTF officers — John O'Callaghan of Norwalk and Daniel Sullivan of New Canaan — offered an analysis of the new financial reporting mechanism instituted by Bishop William E. Lori and a review of clerical personnel as revealed in the Catholic Directory of the diocese.

The effort has been handicapped by refusal of the diocese to explain entries in its various publications, according to Sullivan, a former Securities and Exchange Commission investigator.

"Much of what we find here," he said, holding up the diocesan annual financial report, "is a help to the bishop, but of little help to the rest of us."

O'Callaghan said he had the same problem with the director delineating the 261 clergy attached to the diocese in a wide variety of ways, including four priests on leaves of absence, presumably those who have fallen from grace in the latest priestly scandals.

The national effort to gain the pope's attention is being directed by newly elected VOTF national President Dan Bartley.

"We face a moral crisis triggered by the clergy sex abuse and its cover-up, which precipitated one of the worst scandals in the history of our church," he said in a release announcing the effort. "On top of that, we have a declining priesthood; many American Catholics have left our church; parishes and schools are closing all over the country; and financial improprieties continue to plague our parishes and dioceses.

"Many Catholics know too well the human suffering and financial costs associated with the global clergy sexual abuse crisis," he continued. "By 2004 in the U.S. alone, more than 4,300 priests were alleged to have abused almost 11,000 young people."

Not only does VOTF seek to remove offending bishops, but also it wants the church to open up its administration to lay accountability, citing surveys in which 85 percent of dioceses reported embezzlements within the past five years, according to Bartley.

"We believe this kind of media campaign is imperative to begin convincing our fellow Catholics that the clergy sexual abuse scandal continues to be a dark cloud hanging over our church," Bartley said.