

[Bishop Caggiano impresses VOTF members during Norwalk visit](#)

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NORWALK -- Bishop Frank Caggiano, the new leader of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport, proved as appealing in his first formal meeting with the Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) on Thursday night as his boss, Pope Francis, has proven to international audiences.

The short, spare native of the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, N.Y., who came to the priesthood via the unconventional path of Yale College graduate and book salesman before entering the seminary, gave 160 attending the historic meeting in the First Congregational Church on the Green the hope that their dialogue would continue.

Quite a contrast to his predecessor, Bishop William E. Lori, who shunned the organization and even prohibited its use of church property for meetings or the diocesan newspaper for announcements.

"We pray that we will never again be separated from our bishop or he from us," implored VOTF co-founder Joseph O'Callaghan in his introduction.

Bishop Caggiano didn't make any promises except to conclude a 20-minute address and one hour of Q&A with the observation that the "dialogue" will continue.

The cleric was asked a wide range of questions ranging from church positions toward birth control and abortion to prohibition to women of authoritative positions. He was asked about the formation of priests from vocation through training to ordination and of the economic disparity between parishes in one of the richest dioceses in the nation.

He suggested a major thrust is being made by the church in the training of clergy, since some candidates for the priesthood today don't even know how to recite the Rosary because of the decline in Catholic culture. He said a new emphasis on establishing a strong sense of self in novitiates is aimed at giving them a clearer orientation toward contemporary life and their place in it "so they will be comfortable in their own skins."

One woman suggested that priests often don't have the experience of knowing women during their formation, but Bishop Caggiano assured her he was not so handicapped, citing a strong relationship with his mother and long friendship with two other strong women.

"My mother gave me an unconditional love that sustains me today," he said. "Women have enriched my life."

The bishop is aware that lay people in Fairfield County are eager to volunteer their services to their parishes.

"Pastors don't have the resources to handle all the responsibilities thrust upon them today," he said. "They are especially ill-equipped to handle the finances." He envisions a renewed sense of purpose among Catholics here to revitalize their faith and to impress upon their peers the joy that such development can bring.

"It is best done in one-to-one relationships, one person at a time, instead through some kind of formal program."

And with it all, he hopes to give a face to the poor of the diocese.

"The church can do that," he said.

O'Callaghan, a retired history and theology professor from Fordham University, said that the invitation to speak to VOTF was extended by him and Chairman Jamie Dance at a meeting in the bishop's office last fall.

Toward the end of the Q&A, John Marshall Lee of Bridgeport, a former VOTF leader, made the formal plea to the bishop for the use of church property for meetings. The bishop made no promises, but didn't shut the door.

VOTF was formed in 2002 after the scandal of priestly abuse of children became widely publicized. The organization continues to support those abused by priests.

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