

Statement on SB 1098 by Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport

March 11, 2009

As everyone is very much aware SB-1098, proposed by the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly has provoked a firestorm. Much of the commentary has been intemperate and unthinking. In such a heated atmosphere reasonable discussion of the issues is nearly impossible. The Committee has cancelled the public hearing scheduled for Wednesday March 11 to allow the Attorney-General to review the constitutionality of both the existing statute concerning Religious Corporations and Societies and the amendment embodied in SB 1098.

In the meantime, Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport believes that a reasoned and respectful dialogue between the bishop and the Catholic community concerning lay participation in parish administration is essential. We believe that the laity should have a real say in the administration and financial management of their parishes, not the limited advisory role envisioned by Canon Law. The laity, who constitute the great majority of the Catholic faithful and who contribute the funds essential to the sustenance of our parishes and our priests, presently are effectively excluded from exercising any decisive authority over parish administration and finance.

Connecticut's current law relating to Roman Catholic parish corporations was enacted in the 1950s and is based upon laws going back to the middle years of the nineteenth century. The law established as ex officio members of the parish corporation, the bishop, the vicar general and the pastor. These three ex officio members appoint two lay trustees annually, and may also remove them for cause, or for no reason at all. As appointees serving at the pleasure of the clergy, the lay trustees are neither truly representative of the lay members of the parish nor able to act independently. In fact, the same may be said of the vicar general and the pastor, who under Canon Law owe a duty of obedience to the bishop and also hold their positions at his pleasure. The provisions of the current law reflect an outmoded nineteenth-century conception of the Church.

Since the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s the Church has developed a more expansive understanding of itself as the People of God, embracing all the faithful: bishops, clergy, and laity.

The establishment of a board of directors composed of the bishop and the pastor, as voting members, as well as elected representatives of the parish congregation conforms to the Second Vatican Council's description of the Church as the People of God. Participation by a specified number of laypersons elected annually by the parish congregation would acknowledge the responsibility of the laity for their parish and enhance their sense of ownership and community. The transfer of temporal responsibilities to the laity would liberate the bishop and the pastor so that they may focus on their primary role as spiritual leaders, charged to preach the Gospel and to provide spiritual guidance for their people. By allowing the laity to participate more fully in the governance of the Church, especially in those areas where laypeople have expertise, would not demean the authority of the bishop or the pastor. Presently pastors are overwhelmed by the burden of administration and financial management. At a time when the shortage of priests threatens the celebration of the Eucharist, the center of Catholic worship, the Church should welcome the willingness of the laity to assume such responsibilities.

Now is the opportunity for the bishop to engage all the faithful of the diocese in dialogue aimed at "creating better structures of participation, consultation, and shared responsibilities," called for by Pope John Paul II in his admonition to the bishops of the world in September 2004.

In hope of opening a dialogue with the bishop on this topic, we will write a letter to Bishop Lori offering to work with him on developing measures that might be implemented to more fully invest the laity with real responsibility for the temporal affairs of their parishes.