

Candlelight vigil in Geneva supports victims of priest ; Church questions group's motives; [Near Northwest Final , NNW Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Frustrated with Catholic Church leaders in the wake of the sexual- abuse conviction of former Geneva priest Mark Campobello, a group of parishioners is working to help survivors rebuild their lives and faith.

Full Text (589 words)

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Frustrated with Catholic Church leaders in the wake of the sexual- abuse conviction of former Geneva priest Mark Campobello, a group of parishioners is working to help survivors rebuild their lives and faith.

About 100 people gathered Sunday evening at Peck's Farm Park, on the western edge of Geneva, for a candlelight vigil to pray for and support two victims abused by Campobello.

The service was arranged by an area chapter of Boston-based Voice of the Faithful, one of several lay Catholic groups spawned by the sexual-abuse crisis. Church leaders remain skeptical of its motives and methods.

Donald Bondick of Rockford spoke about the need for healing.

"I was abused by a priest at the age of 13," he said. "This night is not about me, but I can tell you when I pulled into this parking lot tonight and saw so many cars, I just thought, 'Wow.' This night has helped me heal too."

The VOTF chapter, which was formed earlier this year, aims to utilize the teachings of the Catholic Church to fulfill its main goal of supporting survivors of clergy sexual abuse, according to Michael Mastroanni, regional coordinator.

The vigil drew many members of St. Peter's Parish in Geneva, said MaryLu O'Halloran, who helped organize the candlelight gathering.

The parish has been struggling to regain spiritual equilibrium since December 2002, when Campobello, a former priest in residence and teacher at the parish school, was arrested for sexually abusing a 14-year-old female student. He also was charged in the sexual abuse of an Aurora Central Catholic High School female student.

Campobello pleaded guilty in May and is serving an 8-year prison sentence.

Efforts by some parishioners to question how church leaders handled the situation have met with criticism from the church and other members. Tensions increased last spring when the Rockford diocese was held in contempt of court after refusing to turn over church documents.

Frustrated St. Peter's parishioners eventually found support and guidance through VOTF.

"They have been very kind and helpful to us," said parishioner Kate Bochte.

The parish's struggles seem to exemplify what's happening on a national level, according to the results of a survey on the impact of clergy sexual abuse on U.S. Catholics released last week. The survey, conducted in October 2003 and funded by the University of Notre Dame, showed the majority of those filling the pews throughout the country are unhappy.

Certain things are clear, said Catholic University sociologist Dean Hoge, who worked on the survey. At least 80 percent of Catholics said they would like to have more say in local decision making, he reported, adding that should not surprise church leaders.

"Parishioners today are more educated and affluent. In my view, that should not be so threatening," Hoge said this week. "All institutions have to be ready for some changes."

But Hoge said he is surprised by church leaders' refusal to allow VOTF to meet or distribute literature in churches in most dioceses.

"They are not criticizing Jesus Christ, just the rules of running the organization," Hoge said.

Mastroanni said he wished more people viewed VOTF favorably.

"[Hoge] captured the true nature of Voice of the Faithful. It's not an extremist group. We're loyal Catholics who are trying to work for positive change within the church," Mastroanni said.

Owen Phelps, a spokesman for Rockford Bishop Thomas Doran, said that although the church needs more faithful Catholics, for now diocese officials are hedging their bets.

"We will wait to see how the group eventually benefits the church," Phelps said.