

Rockford Register Star

Estimated printed pages: 2

September 14, 2004

Section: Life Style

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Catholic laymen abuse group has voice in Rockford

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Rockford Register Star

Voice of the Faithful, a national organization of laymen formed in response to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church, has a local affiliate.

Since the Rockford area-group formed five months ago, more than 75 local Catholics have attended the meetings, which included a prayer service in the park in August.

Voice of the Faithful began with 30 people in the Boston area, where the abuse scandal broke in 2002. Now there are more than 30,000 registered supporters from all 50 states and 39 countries.

The group has three goals: to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, to support priests with integrity and to help shape the structural change within the church.

"The church is our spiritual home," said regional coordinator Mike Mastroianni, a Rockford native and "cradle Catholic," as members born into the faith are called.

Voice of the Faithful has received resistance and outright criticism from church leaders who question the group's motives. Some accuse Voice of the Faithful of pushing a hidden agenda for married or female priests, gay unions, elected clergy and other controversial issues.

Not true, say Mastroianni and other Voice of the Faithful leaders.

"We're not trying to be a radical group," he said. "We're not saying there should be lay leadership. We know the bishop has the right to run the show."

In the 11-county diocese of Rockford, there are 400,000 Catholics attending 105 parishes. Voice of the Faithful is not permitted to hold its monthly meetings on church property.

"We support the church, so it's disappointing," Mastroianni said.

There are many ways already established for laypeople to be involved in decision-making, including parish councils, Rockford officials say. The new group may call itself "faithful," but it's not sanctioned by the church, Rockford Diocese spokesman Owen Phelps said.

"The jury's still out as to what kind of organization it will ultimately be," Phelps said. "Voice of the Faithful says that they accept church authority, but it's obvious that not everyone that belongs is comfortable with that. If it turns out it's about tearing down the church, its claims of being faithful will be questionable."

Rockford's Voice of the Faithful has been meeting in Protestant churches. Upcoming gatherings will be held at Court Street United Methodist and First Presbyterian churches.

Contact: ewebster@rrstar.com; 815-987-1394.

Mike Mastroianni

PHOTO

BREAKOUT BOX

If you go

· What: Voice of the Faithful meeting

· When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 14

· Where: Court Street Methodist Church, 215 N. Court St., Rockford

· Information: Call Mike Mastroianni at 815-877-0365 or e-mail him at mm5517@rockriver.net.

· On the Web: www.votf.org.

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