

The Catholic League's Response to Voice of the Faithful's Criticism of Bishop Murphy

(For more material related to Bishop Murphy, please go [here](#).)

(8/2003)

VOTF CLAIMS:

According to the [Massachusetts attorney general's] Report, Bishop Murphy played a key role in the failure to protect the children. As a consequence, he has abdicated his moral authority.

With regard to Bishop William Murphy, now of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, the report says:

And, even with undeniable information available to him on the risk of recidivism, Bishop Murphy continued to place a higher priority on preventing scandal and providing support to alleged abusers than on protecting children from sexual abuse. (P.39)

IN FACT:

The above statement excerpted from Attorney General Reilly's report represents an editorial summary of Bishop Murphy's tenure in the Boston Archdiocese, and not a well-supported one. The attorney general's report itself offers virtually no evidence to support this sweeping charge: Bishop Murphy is treated only in a brief blurb on pages 39 and 40 of the report. Surely had the Massachusetts attorney general's office found any damning information about Bishop Murphy, this would be the place to publish it—both in the interest of truth and

in the interest of justifying the attorney general's use of taxpayer money for his grand jury investigation.

Even the book *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*, produced by staff of the *Boston Globe*, contains nothing that casts Bishop Murphy in a poor light. Of the few entries in the index for William F. Murphy, only one is unflattering, and it clearly refers not to Bishop Murphy but to the Rev. William F. Murphy, Delegate to the Cardinal—a different person altogether. In fact, one of the entries even corroborates Bishop Murphy's claim to have supervised John Geoghan's exit from the priesthood. Even the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Boston Globe's* compendium on the crisis has nothing bad to say about Bishop Murphy. But VOTF has already made up its mind about him.

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy misrepresented his role in the cover-up. In his "Report to the Diocese – Part one," (*Long Island Catholic* 7/2/03) Bishop Murphy says that a Delegate (at one time a priest also named William Murphy) was responsible for handling cases of sex abuse, and that the Delegate reported directly to the Cardinal. However, the Attorney General's Report says that... "Although Cardinal Law delegated responsibility for handling clergy sexual abuse matters, his senior managers [i.e. bishops] kept the Cardinal apprised of such matters either directly or through the Vicar of Administration, who supervised the ... Delegate." (P 31) Bishop Murphy himself became Vicar of Administration in 1993 [to 2001]. (P 38)

IN FACT:

Yes, Cardinal Law was "apprised of such matters...through the Vicar of Administration," as it is stated on p.31 of Attorney General Reilly's report. But this was not the procedure during Bishop Murphy's tenure. What VOTF leaves out is the following,

which comes from the very same paragraph in Reilly's report:

For the most part, [Cardinal Law's] involvement included the review and approval of recommendations on such matters from his Vicar of Administration...or after the adoption of the 1993 policy, from the Review Board.

As Bishop Murphy said, the 1993 policy was in place when he became Vicar of Administration. His comments are not inconsistent with Reilly's report.

VOTF CLAIMS:

The Report also says that the "Delegate ... sometimes discussed clergy sexual abuse matters directly with the Cardinal, and on other occasions conveyed information to the Cardinal through Bishop Murphy.(P 38) The report further says that the Delegate "...generally kept both the Cardinal and Bishop Murphy apprised of significant clergy sexual abuse matters." (P 48)

IN FACT:

Bishop Murphy never claimed that he had no knowledge of abuse cases. In his "Report to the Diocese," he wrote,

The Vicar General did not deal with accused priests, **except for the specific cases described below**, none of which involved a reassignment to a pastoral position [emphasis added].

Bishop Murphy did not issue the blanket denial of involvement that VOTF suggests. Furthermore, Bishop Murphy writes,

While I was not involved in handling priests, allegations against them, evaluations of them or any decision regarding their possible return to pastoral ministry, Cardinal Law did on occasion ask my counsel or gave me some specific tasks that dealt with a few of these priests after they had been removed from pastoral ministry.

One of the few such instances mentioned in the report is Bishop Murphy's role in revoking a Fr. Francis Murphy's appointment to a position because he and Cardinal Law "were concerned that [the abusive priest] could still have contact with children through his assignment" (Attorney General's report, p. 64).

In yet another instance, Bishop Murphy's interaction with a priest who had been removed from the ministry is completely to his credit. Commenting on his efforts to remove John Geoghan from his position at the Office of Senior Priests, Bishop Murphy writes:

I met with John Geoghan several times over five or six months trying to get him to resign. Whether I cajoled him by reference to family or pressed him with strong arguments, he kept refusing to respond to that request. With the Cardinal's permission, I removed him against his will. By that point he was living in his family home. Later I worked with the Cardinal on the petition to the Pope who removed him from the priesthood in response to our report and request.

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy abdicated his duty to protect the children by ignoring the criminal nature of child abuse. In denouncing Bishop Murphy's actions, the Report states:

"The problem was compounded because Bishop Murphy failed to recognize clergy sexual abuse of children as conduct deserving an investigation and prosecution by public authorities. Instead he viewed such crimes committed by priests as conduct deserving an internal pastoral response." (P. 39)

IN FACT:

Until recently the Commonwealth of Massachusetts did not require clergy to report abuse; and the internal pastoral response was at the time the norm in all religions. That notwithstanding, the comments about Bishop Murphy amount only to bald assertion. If Attorney General Reilly had specific examples of this behavior, presumably he would have included them in such a comprehensive report. However, the evidence simply is not there.

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy showed a regrettable lapse of judgment when he assigned an alleged abuser to oversee abusers.

In an apparent lapse of judgment, Bishop Murphy was involved in having a priest named Melvin Surrence [sic], who had "been accused himself of sexually abusing children, to be Assistant Delegate responsible for arranging suitable job placements for priests found to have engaged in sexual abuse of children." (P.38) The Attorney General's report further comments that, "The Archdiocese documents relating to Surrence's [sic] assignment do not show any consideration of the propriety of having a man accused of sexually abusing children significantly involved in finding suitable job placements for other alleged abusers. Further, there appears to have been no appreciation of the inherent conflict of interest or appearance of impropriety in having a priest under investigation by the Delegate working as Assistant to the Delegate." (39)

IN FACT:

Bishop Murphy wrote in his "Report to the Diocese":

One of the priests, Melvin Surette, made several proposals to the Cardinal seeking to have a nonpastoral ministry in the chancery. One of his proposals was that he would have an

office under the supervision of the Delegate. Working from that office, he would seek out appropriate job opportunities for priests on leave. Such jobs would have to be such that there would be no possibility of contact with minors. The Chancellor and I approved an expenditure of about \$14,000 for him to set up such an office under the supervision of the delegate. That proposal, to my memory, never materialized and the money was never spent.

VOTF CLAIMS:

It is our firm conviction that Bishop Murphy is not meeting the spiritual and material needs of our Parishioners. Our diocese is suffering under his rule. We are without a spiritual leader.

Bishop Murphy has not satisfactorily addressed the needs of the diocese, especially those of the poor. The Bishop's extravagance in the renovation and furnishing of his own lavish quarters has compounded the problem. The Bishop's Appeal is down; Parish collections are down; donations made by Long Island Voice of the Faithful to Catholic Charities have been returned by Bishop Murphy because "it is important to maintain a sense of unity of mission." Could this be a reason why Mass attendance is also down? Bishop Murphy's decisions and policies have hurt those in need and hindered the ability of the diocese to raise funds from the laity.

IN FACT:

Bringing up the bishop's residence is not only petty; it relies on the gross distortions of the likes of *Newsday's* Jimmy Breslin. As for Bishop Murphy's decision to reject VOTF's donations: this is a sound policy. Few institutions are willing to be bullied by parallel fundraisers who have strings attached to their money and dubious agendas. Complaints like these seem tacked onto VOTF's manifesto for good measure, in

case scandal-related accusations against Bishop Murphy fail.

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy's credibility has been damaged beyond repair. On numerous occasions, and in statements published in the Long Island Catholic, Bishop Murphy has downplayed his role in the Boston cover-up. An objective reading of the Attorney General's Report clearly brands our bishop as one of the key wrong doers.

IN FACT:

This is a strong statement, and it is totally unfounded. An objective reading of the Attorney General's Report leaves one with the conclusion that Reilly did not have the evidence to back up his rhetoric about Bishop Murphy. An objective reading of VOTF's interpretation of the report only proves that point: why else would VOTF resort to grasping at straws, misleading logic, and guilt by association?

Furthermore, Bishop Murphy's efforts to clean up the mess he inherited when he became bishop of Rockville Centre were exemplary. The Diocese's statement on the Massachusetts Attorney General's report puts it well:

What is more relevant to Long Islanders is Bishop Murphy's leadership and actions on issues involving sexual abuse since his appointment to the Diocese of Rockville Centre in September, 2001. To start, Bishop Murphy reviewed the files of all priests in the diocese and removed from ministry anyone who had an allegation of sex abuse of a minor in his personnel file. He revamped the diocesan procedures for dealing with sex abuse of minors, established a hot line for reporting incidents of sexual abuse and appointed a Pastoral Intervention Team to report allegations to law enforcement and to work with victims and the priests accused. All of this was in place more than a month before the bishops met in Dallas in

June 2001.

Bishop Murphy's actions in Rockville Centre were swift and responsible, to say the least. He reined in the abusive priests who remained undisciplined by his predecessor, Bishop McGann; in fact, he removed two priests within two months of his arrival. Bishop Murphy was quick to enact policies to protect the people of his diocese.

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy's continued presence thwarts the healing our diocese needs. Our diocese is scourged with disunity. Faithful Catholics are disillusioned. Attendance is down, contributions are down. We are in a state of disarray. There is a profound and pervasive distrust for our spiritual leader. Polls overwhelmingly support his resignation. We desperately need new leadership.

IN FACT:

Which polls overwhelmingly support Bishop Murphy's resignation? Polls of VOTF members, perhaps; those would hardly be representative of the Catholic population in general, especially when the truth is known about Bishop Murphy. Even so, being a bishop is not a popularity contest; to subject episcopal tenure to poll results would unnecessarily politicize the episcopacy. Who would like to see bishops molding their teachings to pander like politicians?

VOTF CLAIMS:

Bishop Murphy has contributed to the American Bishops' loss of moral authority. In a wider context, Bishop William Murphy, along with the Bishops of the United States, has lost the moral high ground that used to give weight to statements

concerning issues such as poverty in our country, war, nuclear weapons and the death penalty. Whether or not people agreed with the Bishops' positions on these issues, the statements were debated both within and without the Catholic Church and in the pages of many respected publications. This, unfortunately, seems no longer to be the case.

IN FACT:

It is notable that VOTF concentrates only on the bishops' positions on "poverty in our country, war, nuclear weapons and the death penalty." They are all surely issues worthy of the bishops' attention. But why no mention of such issues as abortion, homosexuality, human cloning, or euthanasia? Indeed, soon after the scandal reached its peak, major newspapers applauded bishops who spoke out against the war. At that time, few used the scandal to silence the Church. However, when the Church recently spoke out on gay marriage, few could resist telling the Church to mind its own business. Only then did commentators claim that the Church should not speak, in light of the sex abuse scandal. The fact that VOTF is unconcerned by efforts to silence the Church on sexual issues is very telling.

William Donohue's comments in the August 3 edition of the *New York Times* sum up the entire matter succinctly:

"I am not interested in someone's editorial opinion," Mr. Donohue said. "I want evidence."

"What we have here is classic McCarthyism, guilt by association," Mr. Donohue said later in the interview. "Simply because Bishop Murphy served in Boston, he is presumed guilty."

▪ [Read about the Catholic League's petition drive in](#)

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