



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

238 Jewett Avenue • Bridgeport, Connecticut 06606 • 203-416-1352 • FAX: 203-371-8323

Saturday-Sunday, December 5-6, 2009

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, I share in the ministry of the Good Shepherd. In that spirit of love and concern, I wish to alert you to yet another significant challenge the Diocese of Bridgeport is now facing. It could be called "The Lawn Man Liability Suit."

Back in 1968, a lay person who is claimed to have operated a lawn mowing service allegedly abused a minor, Michael Powel. Mr. Powel claimed that he worked for the lawn man, but that has not been established. Among the lawn man's customers was St. Theresa Parish in Trumbull. Over 25 years later, Mr. Powel claimed that he recovered a memory of this alleged abuse. In 2002 (the year the Connecticut General Assembly vastly expanded the statutes of limitation for sexual abuse claims) Mr. Powel sued the lawn man, and was awarded a large judgment in 2005 when the lawn man ceased defending the action.

After he learned that the lawn man had little money, Mr. Powel in 2006 sued the Diocese of Bridgeport. Mr. Powel falsely claimed that the lawn man was actually an employee of the Diocese. He also claimed that even if the lawn man had not been an employee of Diocese, the Diocese was still somehow responsible for supervising the lawn man's personal and business lives.

Mr. Powel added an accusation that, in the winter of 1971, a now-deceased priest assigned to the parish had also abused him. Mr. Powel made this accusation even though he wasn't a member of that parish and may never have worked there. This accusation is also based on a "memory" claimed to have been recovered over 30 years after the alleged abuse took place.

Mr. Powel died in 2008. His claims against the Diocese are now being pursued by his estate. In late 2009, his estate called in a California-based law firm (part of a network of trial lawyers who sue Catholic dioceses nationwide) to advance these claims.

Mr. Powel's "Lawn Man Liability Theory" goes where no other liability claims against Catholic institutions have gone before. Imagine if you were held responsible for what your lawn man, plumber, or electrician may have done over 40 years ago! This is what the Diocese is now fighting.

What's more, the California law firm is using Mr. Powel's claim that a priest abused him to justify a broad based demand for documents that fall outside the period during which Mr. Powel claims to have been abused. Thus they are not relevant to his claims. In an attempt to inflame public opinion, the California lawyers have characterized these documents as

Saturday-Sunday, December 5-6, 2009  
Page 2

"secret." However, they include personnel, medical and legal files that any organization would consider privileged or confidential. This California law firm wants to troll through these documents for its own business purposes. The firm's recent mailing to local households reinforces its opportunistic intentions.

This same law firm also claims that these old cases are "a public safety nightmare." This is false and unjust. The Diocese has made public the names of offending priests, removed them from ministry, reached out to victims, and settled all of those claims. As you know, the Diocese has also gone to the greatest lengths to create a safe environment for our children and young people - background checking more than 30,000 clergy, employees, and volunteers, and providing prevention training for more than 95,000 people.

In these days, you may also be reading media accounts of documents released by the courts that pertain to a settlement the Diocese reached in 2001, prior to my arrival as your Bishop. Please continue to recall that the key information in those documents, which relates to alleged incidents in the 1960s and 1970s, has been public for a very long time. More than 200 stories about them appeared in the media between 1993 and 2002.

I promise to keep you informed as this case progresses. More information and updates are posted on [www.bridgeportdiocese.com](http://www.bridgeportdiocese.com).

In spite of these problems and challenges, please remember that we are entering upon a season of joy and grace as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Please pray for me and for the Diocese of which we are a part. And please be assured of my heartfelt prayers for you and your loved ones. May this holy season truly be full of grace.

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "William E. Lori". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend William E. Lori  
Bishop of Bridgeport