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Bridgeport pastor's book addresses church's challenges

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The Rev. Ronald Popivchak, pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Ukrainian Church in Bridgeport, holds a copy of his book, "Bishop for a Day." (Gene Walsh — The Times Herald)

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BRIDGEPORT >> The Rev. Ronald Popivchak recently took Pope Francis up on his invitation last fall for clergy and laymen to submit their ideas on ways the Catholic Church can upgrade its profile.

And so the pastor of Ss. Peter and Paul Ukrainian Catholic Church in Bridgeport appointed himself administrator, overseer, leader – a metaphorical bishop for a day, as it were.

In his newly published book, "Bishop for a Day: Ideas to Heal and Renew the Catholic Church," Popivchak — a gregarious man who is a self-avowed fishing buff and prefers being called Father Ron — covers a lot of ground in a quick and easy read of 91 pages filled with opinions and solutions surrounding such issues as parish closures, abortion, clergy sex abuse scandals, contraception, women in the church and youth.

"About a year and a half ago I decided to sit down and gather up all the facts I could and my ideas to try to help the church and the bishops and present them," Popivchak noted. "I saw five or six priests in our town and neighboring towns charged with sex abuse and the church couldn't get a

handle on it. It bothered me, and also seeing the diocese going bankrupt. None of this is healthy for the church.”

In his introduction Popivchak writes, “For the first time in modern history, the Holy Father wants to know what we the priests and you the laity think about the thorny issues of family life! Divine Providence indeed! And if the Pope himself wants ideas, far be it from me to refuse this invitation. But I write not only out of obligation, but mainly out of love for the faithful and respect for the bishops. And I write as a Pastor with decades of experience with the sole purpose of helping the Church and her betroubled leaders in these difficult times.”

With streams of light radiating through a stained glass window onto a bishop’s miter, the striking cover sets the premise for the book, Popivchak said.

“The Holy Spirit is trying to enlighten the church, but the church isn’t reacting to it. If that hat were on my hat, what would I do? That’s the conceit I try to convey.”

Among the many things about the modern church he would attempt to rectify is the church’s long-held view on women’s secondary status, Popivchak allowed.

“If you remove half the population in decision making, what’s going to happen? It’s a shame how women have been (excluded),” he said.

Recalling how the dozen apostles were all male, Popivchak writes, “When the going got tough on that first Good Friday, only one man, the Beloved John, remained at His side. It is also true that Our Lord had many female followers and confidantes, such as sisters Martha and Mary, and the women at the cross. Matthew’s Gospel reads: ‘And many women were there, watching from a distance, the same women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and looked after Him. Among them were Mary Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.’ Countless such modern-day Marys and Marthas are capable and willing to ‘look after’ Our Lord and His Holy Church today. It only remains for the Bishops to invite them into the Chancery door.”

Popivchak believes his bold foray into publication, a “semi-self-published” effort accomplished in collaboration with Infinity Publishing of West Conshohocken, is unprecedented in the area.

“I’ve been here 43 years and I think this is the first time a priest in the area has come out with a book,” said the man who grew up near Pittsburgh, earned a doctorate in Theology at The Catholic University and has published works in the Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity and The Mariner.

The book has been selling out via Amazon, BarnesandNoble.com and other literary outlets “because people want to read about ideas that will help the church,” Popivchak said. “The poor church is struggling and so many dioceses have declared bankruptcy in this country.”

When it comes to recruiting priests, Popivchak is adamant that the church needs to “hype” the job more aggressively.

“How can any organization seeking recruits — U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, anybody — find newcomers to the service without advertising? Go to Madison Avenue. Put a billboard on the Schuylkill Expressway. What’s it going to cost you? You spend \$3 billion on the sex abuse scandal and you don’t have \$10,000 to put up a billboard on I-95, going south or north, where the young people are driving every day? Ideas like that, which everybody else is using — and the church seems blind to them.”

Bishops need to come out of their “seclusion,” he added.

“Anybody who is a big time guy, when there’s a crisis, gets on television and tells the people what’s going on. Why can’t they pick a bishop who is photogenic, put him on television on Saturday night or Sunday morning and tell the American people what went on with this sex abuse scandal? They’re scared to do anything like that.”

For all his seemingly revolutionary pitches, Popivchak said he doesn’t consider his book controversial.

“It’s just ideas you can take or leave. Some of the ideas are very easy to enforce and implement,” he said.

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