



## January 9, 2004 - Letter from Archbishop Seán Patrick O'Malley on Parish Reconfiguration

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May the Grace and Peace of our Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ be with each and every one of you throughout the New Year!

During my recent Advent meeting with most of the priests serving in the Archdiocese of Boston, I informed them that I would soon write to all of the faithful of the Archdiocese about the process of reconfiguration. As I now fulfill that commitment, I invite your careful consideration of this letter.

In the course of the last twenty years or so, the number of parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston has decreased from 404 in 1985 to 357 at present. During much of these past two decades, the so-called "Boston plan" sought to develop recommendations at the cluster level for parish reconfigurations. Pastoral planning at the parish and cluster levels properly has had, as its main focus, fulfilling the mission of the Church.

Today, for a variety of reasons, such planning for mission is more crucial than ever. Among these reasons are:

Changes in demographics: people have moved; they are having fewer children; there are fewer regular churchgoers;

The priest shortage: we need more than the forty (40) Boston seminarians we have right now. All of us, clergy and faithful, need to identify and invite young men to consider a vocation to the priesthood, as we foster environments in our homes and in our parishes that encourage all our people, young and old, to respond faithfully and generously to the call of God in their lives;

Financial difficulties faced by many parishes: exacerbated, no doubt, by the sexual abuse scandal, many parishes have been struggling for years, if not decades, with overwhelming fiscal challenges, including the inability to meet all their financial responsibilities;

The current poor state of many of our buildings: as a snapshot of the dimensions of this reality, a recent review of all parish property in the City of Boston, comprising roughly 1/7 of all the buildings in the Archdiocese, determined that to bring these buildings within Boston proper up to an acceptable standard of usability would cost approximately \$104 million.

Pastoral planning for mission must be addressed without further delay. The reallocation of resources, reconfiguration, is urgently needed and must move from the mode of planning and conversation to that of action and implementation. The groundwork has been laid in the past two decades. Much discussion has already occurred. Now is the time for decisive action.

Together, we must work to rebuild our Church. My conviction – a conviction I hope and pray that you share – is that the work of rebuilding our Church entails a serious, committed effort throughout the Archdiocese to realize a Church that will be better able to fulfill the mission entrusted to Her by the Lord in response to the needs of the faithful. This vision means that much collaboration and cooperation has to take place as we move into the next phase of reconfiguration. As this part of the process begins, please know that:

Reconfiguration will involve a substantial number of parishes throughout the entire Archdiocese;

No parishes have been designated for closure. The number of parishes to be closed has not yet been determined;

Reconfiguration will involve not merely those parishes unable to pay their bills.

The Most Reverend Richard G. Lennon, Moderator of the Curia, has accepted my request to oversee the reconfiguration process and serve as Chair of a Central Committee, comprised of lay faithful and clergy from each of the five regions of the Archdiocese, along with a few members of the Archdiocesan staff. I look forward to working with and



receiving counsel from this committee as decisions are made in the reconfiguration process.

Not only will the regional bishops, vicars, pastors and other clergy be involved and asked to give their input, but also I expect that lay pastoral staff, parish pastoral council and parish finance council members will also be involved in the conversations and recommendations. Moreover, I want to ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for parishioners to be heard – this process must truly be the work of the whole Church. All of these conversations, involving so broad a spectrum of people, will enrich the reconfiguration process and strengthen our Archdiocesan effort to rebuild our Church. As we come together for these conversations, it is imperative that all come with an open mind rather than a self-interested plan to save a particular parish. The reconfiguration will only work if everyone involved is committed to serve the whole Catholic family of the Archdiocese of Boston.

Every parish in the Archdiocese, except those in Lawrence and Lowell who are already well into the process, will begin conversations about reconfiguration later this month. Bishop Lennon will soon communicate a more specific and detailed timeline.

Past experience has shown that it will be painful to close parishes. We must be sensitive to that reality and help each other in the grieving process as a number of our parishes close. However, even in the midst of mourning, we must challenge each other to make the sacrifices necessary to ensure that the parishes that do emerge will be stronger, more able to respond to peoples' needs, and better staffed with more resources for ministry. The painful sacrifices of reconfiguration must lead to stronger Catholic parishes better equipped to carry on the work of evangelization, to reach our young people, to serve our senior citizens and our poor, to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy and to pass on the faith to future generations. We must accept the challenge to make great sacrifices to achieve an even greater good. The future of our Church's ministry in the Archdiocese depends on God's grace and our willingness to make the sacrifices necessary for reconfiguration.

Thank you for your attention to so lengthy a letter. Thank you for being faithful to Christ and His Church here in the Archdiocese of Boston. Please join with me and with our sisters and brothers in Christ as we shoulder the cross of reconfiguration and accept the challenge to rebuild our Church.

I pray that our Lord Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel, God with us, may continue to smile upon all of us who together make up the Church of Boston and bless us with His gifts of Joy, Hope and Peace, as I entrust our effort to rebuild our Church to the powerful intercession and protection of His Blessed Mother. I remain

Devotedly yours in Christ,  
Most Reverend Seán Patrick O'Malley, OFM Cap  
Archbishop of Boston

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