



February 4, 2004 - Archbishop Seán O'Malley on Reallocation and Reconfiguration

Good Evening. It has been a little over six months since the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II asked me to come to Boston. As you can well imagine, I was struck by the responsibility of guiding this great Archdiocese through the period of crisis. Thank you for your patience and your understanding as I come to know the Archdiocese better, and the many wonderful people who call it home. I am also very grateful to all those with whom I work, whose goal is to strengthen the Church in Boston and the faith of its people.

Your prayers and kind words have been a great source of strength to me during these past six months. Recently, the archdiocese has settled well over 500 legal claims stemming from the abuse of young people, and we continue to work to settle those few cases that are still pending. A clear plan has been put into place to repay the 85 million dollar debt incurred to fund the settlement, so that no funds from parishes, the Catholic Appeal, the Promise for Tomorrow Campaign, or the funds used for Catholic Schools will be diverted from their intended use. The settlement moneys will come from the sale of the Archbishop's Residence and adjacent land along with the insurance settlement.

The recent independent audit of the Archdiocese's compliance with the national Policies and Procedures for handling allegations of clergy sexual misconduct shows that our efforts are succeeding, and that we have garnered high marks for our continuing effort to prevent the abuse of children, and to be diligent in handling any future allegations. The Office of Pastoral Outreach continues to work with the survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their families to provide pastoral care and to fund counseling services for them. This represents our commitment of people and resources to the continuing care of victims and their families.

Beyond the issues connected with the crisis, the time is at hand for empanelling a new group of lay leaders for the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, and a new group of priests for the Presbyteral Council. These two councils will serve as full consultative voices in furthering the mission of the Church here in Boston. Their perspective and collective wisdom make these bodies essential to my work as the Archbishop. I look forward to working with them in formulating plans and policies for our future.

Last year's Catholic Appeal of the Archdiocese has not only realized its fundraising goal, but has surpassed it by over 1.5 million dollars. It is a great relief to know that you have come forward with your generosity to begin to help fill the gap of the last couple of years. I am deeply grateful to those of you who have seen this need and helped us on the road to recovery.

The Gospel and our Baptism call us to live the Good News. One important way we do this is through our outreach to those who are needy. I am delighted that Fr. Bryan Hehir, a man with a distinguished record of service to the needy and attention to the Church's mission of compassion, has accepted to serve as the head of Catholic Charities here in Boston. He has recently worked as the director of Catholic Charities for the entire United States, and he understands the great role to be played by the Church and her people in serving the poor, the newly arrived to our shores, our youth at risk, and all those who, in Christ's name, we seek to console and to care for. The work of Catholic Charities is an important reminder of the incarnational nature of the Church's social teaching. Jesus' gospel imperative is enfolded in the manner in which we as a community care for the neediest, the weakest, and the most vulnerable in our midst.

Catholic Social teachings are based on the dignity of every human being from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. Sadly, social policy is too often formulated by pressure groups with a limited perspective, seriously compromised by the individualism and materialism of our age. The Church's social teaching is distilled from centuries of theological and philosophical reflection and the observation of the human condition and behavior, and stands in sharp contrast to the single issue pressure groups that focus solely on self interest and short term consequences. The Social Gospel is based on our origins as God's creatures, redeemed by Christ, living in the hope of eternal life. I urge Catholics to become acquainted with the Church's social teachings. Those who have taken the time and made the effort are often very pleasantly surprised, indeed, even proud that their Church has such a consistent and well reasoned approach to social issues. Far from imposing our religious dogmas on a pluralistic society we offer a well reasoned interpretation of natural law and a social ethic based on human dignity and the common good. It is an ethic that demands sacrifices but one that safeguards human rights and freedom.



Among those who have openly embraced the Church's teaching and its mission are seven men that I had the honor of ordaining to the transitional diaconate last Saturday. We all anticipate with great joy their priestly ordination this coming May. Even in difficult times like the present, God is calling men to give their lives in the service of God's people. On Saturday I had the opportunity to thank these seven new deacons who have said "yes" to a vocation, "yes" to God. I also thanked their families and friends for supporting them in their response to God's call. We are a Eucharistic people. The Church gathers around the altar, around the Eucharist. We need good and holy priests. If you are a Catholic, you have a huge stake in the priesthood and vocations. Christ has given us, His Church, the gift of the priesthood to perpetuate the Eucharist, to preach the Gospel, to forgive sins, and to help build vibrant communities of faith. It is the responsibility of the entire community to help promote vocations in the Church. Priest, parents, and Catechists must instill in every Catholic youth a sense of personal vocation and of communal mission as part of Christ's Church. Vocations are everybody's business. In spite of the ordination of seven new deacons this past weekend, the church of Boston still faces a substantial decline over the foreseeable future in the number of priests available to serve in our parishes.

There are still many people who remain alienated from the church or who feel they cannot trust the leadership of the church. There is a growing desire on the part of priests and laity that their voices be heard and their counsel be sought. We are anxious to have effective parish pastoral councils and finance councils. We pledge the Archdiocese to complete transparency in all our financial affairs. Moneys that are realized by the sale of Church properties, as well as the use of those revenues, will be fully reported to our parishioners.

There is a myth that the Catholic Church has unlimited financial resources. Our only real wealth is the devotion and commitment of faithful Catholics. Just as the poor, the sick, and the marginalized are the protagonists of the Gospel, they must be the focus of our ministrations. The poor and the suffering have a special claim on our love and our resources.

These first six months I have spent with you in Boston have provided me with many opportunities to experience the hope that accompanies any new beginning. More people are returning to the Church. More are supporting the Church's works of mercy. As I have heard in all corners of the Archdiocese, we need to heal and we need to reach out together to renew our faith community. You and I, while continuing the important work of healing, are ready to start rebuilding the church in Boston. We are ready to move forward with some serious thinking and some hard choices that will enable us to rebuild from a solid foundation. We need to be morally solid, spiritually solid and financially solid in order to give life to our hopes and dreams for our faith community.

For that reason, we cannot speak only of the positive things that have been accomplished, but we must attend to the difficult work that needs to be done in the months ahead. In spite of the healthy trend in giving to the Catholic Appeal, the archdiocese still faces a deficit of over 4 million dollars in the next fiscal year. Half of the deficit is due to direct services given to parishes and schools by the Archdiocese. In order to meet the operating deficits that we have realized over the last few years and pay for the expenses that we will realize in the future, two years ago we had to borrow 37 million dollars from the Knights of Columbus. We will have to pay that loan back. This has nothing to do with paying for abuse settlements, but has everything to do with providing vital services to parishes and schools, funding the education of our seminarians, permanent deacons, and lay workers, fostering a solid faith formation for our children, and reaching out to young adults on college campuses and parishes who want a vital faith community.

Right now, the main task on the minds of most of us, clergy and laity, is the process of reconfiguration of parish resources. This is a process that will affect all 357 parishes in the Archdiocese. This process is not just about closing parishes; it is about building a framework to strengthen and revitalize as we go forward together as a faith community. Yes, some parishes will close. Others will welcome parishioners from nearby areas. Still others will work to renew themselves as places of spiritual renewal and evangelization.

Beginning in December at a meeting with all the priests of the archdiocese, and later in a letter to the people of the archdiocese, I set out the situation before us. In brief, there are four main reasons for our work to reallocate parish resources:



The changes in demographics: From 1860 until 1960, the Archdiocese of Boston built churches and opened parishes to accommodate the growing number of Catholics moving here from overseas, and the large families they established upon their arrival. In many places, the local parish became the name of the neighborhood, with people meeting and greeting each other saying things like, "You live in Saint Paul's? So does my sister!" But since 1960, families have gotten smaller and moved out beyond the trolley line. For that reason we have some churches that aren't the bustling places they once were, and other churches that are growing. Let me give you a few examples. In just over 15 years, the number of baptisms that were celebrated in all parishes of the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston has fallen by a drop of over 400. During the same time span, the number of baptisms in the parishes of the city of Quincy decreased by over 200. Meanwhile we have large parishes like St. Michael's in North Andover that jumped from 163 baptisms to over 300 baptisms and Most Holy Redeemer in East Boston that increased from 100 baptisms to 436 baptisms. Clearly, church resources have to be reallocated to meet the decrease in needs in some places, and the increase in others. In some older neighborhoods, a one-mile walk can take you past four or five Catholic churches. We just can't sustain that kind of reduplication. Under the best circumstances it is impractical, in our present situation it would be impossible.

Another factor is the decline in the number of clergy. When I was ordained a priest in 1970, it was not uncommon to have more than 20 priests ordained in a single year in our Archdiocese. The number of those being ordained has decreased considerably over the following decades. In Boston, since 1988, there has been a loss of 341 diocesan priests, a decline of over 37%. Clearly this trend must be reversed. We need more than the forty (40) Boston seminarians we have right now. The median age of priests in the Archdiocese is 59 and the number of active priests over seventy is 132. In the next 10 years the number of active priests will be drastically reduced by death and retirement.

Many parishes have been struggling for years, if not decades, with overwhelming money problems, including their inability to meet all their financial obligations. Salaries and benefits, while not in competition with the private sector, must offer a living wage and decent healthcare and retirement benefits. You know, as do all of us, that those costs have gone up astronomically in the past ten years. The cost of insurance and of heating and repairing buildings, the cost of maintaining the services a parish must provide and the cost of something as everyday as clearing snow, have all gone up. Many parishes and schools simply cannot pay their normal operating costs. At the beginning of the Jubilee Year 2000, the Archdiocese of Boston wrote off \$26.6 million dollars in debt owed by parishes and schools to the Archdiocese. Since that time three years ago, parishes and schools that are not able to pay their bills have accrued additional operating debt of \$7.4 million dollars. Clearly, this cannot go on without putting insurance and pension programs at risk.

As I told the priests who gathered in December, 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. That doesn't mean making unnecessary repairs or renovations or even bringing them up to code, that means making them safe and suitable for use by the parishes and schools.

These are not the only reasons for the process of reallocation, but they are the main ones. Each of these needs, by itself, substantially affects our ability to carry out the Church's mission. When these circumstances are brought together as they now are, the case for the process of reallocation is compelling. As you gather in your clusters over the next few weeks, I ask you to participate in the process with a spirit of cooperation and openness to the possibilities before you to give our Church a firm foundation for the ministry entrusted to us. This process will, in the end, affect each and every agency and parish of the Archdiocese to provide the Church in Boston the capacity to address the needs of its people, and to fulfill its mission.

Closing a parish should make you sad... it makes me sad. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined having to do this. And never in a million years would I ask this of you if I were not certain that it was necessary. Please know that your feelings of sorrow, frustration and bewilderment are normal and completely understandable. As Catholics we love our parish churches, and we will grieve – together – as some close. I know many of you are having difficulty seeing where this is all going to take us.



Knowing that, this evening I come to you to ask you to work together, to be creative together, and to express your love for your faith together. As you gather in your groups, conquer your anxiety and look squarely, and without blinking, at the future you can provide for the Church, know that I am doing the same. There is not a pre-ordained outcome. You have before you the opportunity to make recommendations for identifying some parishes for closing but others for growth. The possibility of growth will depend on our willingness to make sacrifices. It is like pruning back plants to stimulate new growth.

I'm reminded of how the author Mark Twain upon reading his own obituary remarked, "Reports about my death are greatly exaggerated." Many reports concerning reconfiguration are greatly exaggerated. Rumors are destructive and they are a waste of energy. Better to use that energy to look for the Good News in this process. The process of reconfiguration that we are all involved in is intended to elicit advice from parishes and their people, from the Vicars, Regional Bishops, and a Central Committee so that I can make decisions as to how to best use our talents and resources as Church. It is only after the process has finished that any decisions will be made about parish or school closings. Make this process work by giving me good advice, well thought-out and with an understanding of the challenges. The input of our priests and laity is crucial. We cannot afford to drag the process on over too lengthy a period. We need you to make this process a priority now. Many have suggested that the Archbishop simply draw up a list of parishes that need to be closed feeling that it is too painful to expect people to entertain closing their own parishes. I have chosen not to do this in order to obtain the input of our clergy and laity. In many parts of the diocese the process of planning closings and mergers has been going on for some time. The clusters have existed for years, some have worked hard, others have done less to further cooperation and sharing of resources.

I am reminded of a man in Dublin who went out one winter day and put on a raincoat he had not worn in years. When he reached in the pocket he found a ticket from a cobbler shop where he had taken a pair of shoes for repairs five years ago, but he had never retrieved them. So he went to the shop hoping the shoes were still there and without saying anything gave the ticket to the shoemaker who went into the back of his shop with the receipt and emerged a few minutes later to say – Your shoes will be ready on Tuesday.

We are trying to move ahead with this process knowing that until the reconfiguration is finished the life of the Archdiocese is held hostage. We hesitate to invest in buildings if we are not going to keep those buildings. We need to name pastors and establish new programs that are on hold as long as the reconfiguration process goes on. We do not have the luxury to tarry in the task at hand. That is why I am hoping that we will be able to keep to our timetable.

This hard work makes me think of the Lord Jesus, as he likened the struggle to realize the kingdom of God with the pain and struggle of a woman in labor, "When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world." (John 16:21) We are experiencing pain right now, but in the end we will give birth to a renewed local church better able to serve the needs of proclaiming the Gospel. If you've ever painted a room, you know it's a lot of work. The work cannot begin, though, until you have a vision of what the room will look like when you finish. You think about what you would really like to have to show for all your work, what change you want to accomplish. You look at a color chart and pick a shade that will really make a difference. And then the dream has to wait while you go through all the scraping and sanding and mess to prepare the walls for their great improvement. No one wants to scrape and sand, but we all know that the effort of painting will be wasted if we don't eliminate some of the old, tired paint first. And then the day comes when all the tearing apart and scraping and sanding are finished. The time has come to go get the new paint and dip a brush into the luminous liquid and begin to cover the walls with your dream of newness. The room now changes rapidly from a state of disarray and repair to a real change for the better.

So please, as you meet in your groups over the next few weeks, take a minute to picture your dream, to flip through the paint chart of possibilities for a more responsive pastoral presence. Reflect on what you can accomplish to renew our parish life. Do you long for more participation and better music at Mass, do you hope for a vibrant youth group for your teens, do you wish there were something more parishes could do to accommodate the elderly, do you see a vision of a parish where people are eager to gather to share how they live the Gospel? Can you picture a parish that reaches out to the community with the love and support that a strong faith community can offer? Dream and plan.



Then, start by picking up your scrapers and sanders: Discover what you can trim away to make a good basis for your vision. Parishes are communities of faith, not buildings. They are gatherings of people, not bricks and mortar. Granted, the Archdiocese has some beautiful old churches among those that may close. But how can we afford to prop up crumbling buildings when we can use those same resources to build up the kind of parish of faith that we dream of.

The ultimate goal of reconfiguration is to further the Mission of the Church. It is about announcing the good news of the faith. It is about fulfilling Jesus' great commandment to love one and other. Let me tell you what all this is going to do. We are going to recapitalize and move our resources and strengthen our church so we can educate our children, feed the poor, clothe the naked, house the homeless, heal the wounded and ill and the broken-hearted. We are going to continue to support strong parishes where vibrant life and liturgy can be found. We are going to seek to spread the good news of the Gospel and Jesus' message of love. And we are going to do all that and more because you took time to dream and to share your vision with your faith community.

It is everyone's experience that when the process of reconfiguration is done well, it revitalizes the local church communities. Suddenly, two or three small parishes in a city or town that were individually struggling to make ends meet, lacked the numbers of parishioners to serve the volunteer needs of the parish, and found themselves worshipping at Sunday Masses where two-thirds of the pews were empty, now find themselves combined into one community that has the resources to serve the financial and pastoral needs of all, worshipping and praising the Lord in liturgies alive with many voices and hearts. All of a sudden, priests and staffs who have been struggling to get by have the wherewithal in terms of staff numbers and finances to do the things that need to be done. Meanwhile, two local parish schools that have become one school with the same number of students, but with better facilities, better teachers, and a better long term forecast for continuing success.

We need to dream together about what we can accomplish as a Church. Walking together as a people of goodwill, we can make this happen. Recently, a pastor whose parish had gone through a very long process of merger with another parish that was painful and difficult received a note from a couple who had attended the parish's 4:00 PM Christmas Mass. The couple wrote:

"[We] thought we were in a cathedral in Rome... The church was radiant that evening and as the marvelous singing filled the air with the congregation actively joining in, it was a moving experience for us.... You have done an outstanding job these past few months bringing together the families of [two parishes], and it certainly was evident at this Mass that your hard efforts have come to fruition. Although it was difficult adjusting to the closing of our church, [we] believe that we now have a better religious and parish life than we had previously. We are most happy at [our new parish]. You reap what you sow and in the coming years, thanks to you and [your staff], this parish will continue to move forward and be blessed. The spirit is there and growing!

Christ never promised that discipleship would be easy, but He promised to be with us and send His spirit to guide us. The spirit brings new life and makes all things new again. May God's Holy Spirit fill all our hearts and give us the wisdom and courage to heed His words to St. Francis, "Rebuild my Church."

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