



Parish Reconfiguration

May 25, 2004 - Remarks of Archbishop O'Malley on Parish Reconfiguration

Today is not an easy day for the people of the Archdiocese of Boston. This morning all of our pastors and parishes were notified of the results of the reconfiguration process. Many parishes received the news that they would be remaining open and welcoming people from other parishes in the months ahead. As a result of this process there will be 65 less parishes, but this translates into the closing of 60 churches since five of the former parish churches will continue as worship sites. Although this reconfiguration responds to the very special needs of the present, a radical reconfiguration of the archdiocese has been discussed for many years. Changes in population, the movement of people from the cities to the suburbs, the decrease in the number of active Catholics have all contributed to the present predicament. At this time, over one third of our parishes are operating in the red, the deterioration of our parish buildings and churches (that in the city of Boston alone would cost over 100 million dollars to repair), and the aging clergy (130 pastors are over 70 years of age) have forced us to make the hard decisions that we have announced today.

The alternative to going through this exercise would be that we would experience a continual decline in some areas of our archdiocese, closing parish after parish, school after school, out-reach program after out-reach program, all because the archdiocese would be unable to subsidize these entities. Furthermore, the archdiocese would be faced with the serious reality of not being able to meet its pension and medical fund obligations for its employees. This we cannot allow to happen.

In addition, I want to assure the people of the archdiocese that the decision to close parishes is in no way connected with the need to finance the legal settlement with the victims of clergy sexual abuse. The sale of the Brighton property of the former archbishop's residences and surrounding land has raised the \$90 million dollars needed to do so. No money from the future sale of parish assets will be used to pay for the settlement. What these funds will do is allow us to financially support as needed the parishes and schools that do remain in the archdiocese as well as to recapitalize our pension and medical funds. This process of reconfiguration is directed not towards the past, but towards the future mission of the Church.

Concerning this, last December I met with all of the priests of the archdiocese in order to explain both the reasons and the process for reconfiguration. The first step took place in February when staff and laity from each parish met in their various local clusters. Over the course of the cluster meetings, thousands of lay men and women, religious, deacons, and priests came together to consult, listen, and dialogue about the future of the parishes in their local area. The recommendations of the various clusters were then sent to the local vicar, a priest who coordinates a grouping of 12-13 local parishes, who then made his own recommendations to the regional bishop. The regional bishops then considered the cluster's ideas and then added his own. All of this was presented to a reconfiguration central committee of 24 people, most of whom were lay men and women. This committee gathered together for over 43 hours of meetings, pouring over all of the various recommendations that had been made over the course of each stage of the process. Their report was then presented to me for my consideration.

As required by church law, my initial determinations were presented to the presbyteral or priests council of the archdiocese so that I could hear their counsel, which I did in three days of meetings. From all of this, it is quite apparent that extensive consultation, work and effort was involved in this reconfiguration process. This consultation and input from so many people was extremely important in helping me make the difficult decisions I have made today. At every step of the process we took great care not to place the burden of reconfiguration on the backs of the poor. We have tried to distribute closings across all regions of the Archdiocese so that we shall be able to ensure the Church's presence in all areas of the Archdiocese in the future, especially in the inner city and in rural areas.

I am profoundly aware of the emotion the announcement of the closing of a parish evokes. It means the loss of a spiritual home, the place where so much time and resources have been invested, the house where so many important moments in people's lives, from birth to death, have taken place. I wish there was some way that all of these wonderful houses of life and prayer could remain open and alive and full. But there is not. Yet, I know from my own experi-



ence of being uprooted many times in life that the Church's faith can be as alive in one place as it is in another. As one church is closed, another church is waiting to welcome its people to a place which can become more alive, more spirit-filled, and more able to proclaim the good news of our faith because of the talents, treasure, and time its new members will bring. Doors may be closing and lights may be extinguished in one church, but other doors are open and arms are extended in welcome in another church in which the light of faith will burn all the brighter in renewal. Closing a parish does not mean an end to the book, just a chapter in the story of life and faith that is being written every day of our life as a Church.

This process will challenge all of us to move beyond a parochial mindset and realize that we are Catholic, which means universal. We may think of ourselves as liberal Catholics, as Latin Mass Catholics, Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, Lithuanian Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, French Catholics, Vietnamese Catholics, Haitian Catholics, Cape Verdean Catholics, the Voice of the Faithful or the Silent Majority. We need to put the accent on Catholic and come together as one people ready to make sacrifices for our Church. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. This is not a matter of winners and losers. If we all see ourselves as part of the Catholic family, we will realize that the entire Church is the winner if everybody is willing to work together for the common good and to promote the Church's mission as we move forward.

Before I turn the podium over to Bishop Lennon, I wish to thank the people of the Archdiocese of Boston for their strength and fidelity over the past few years. Many of the wounds of the abuse crisis are still there and the healing we need as an archdiocese has only just begun. I am fully aware that all that has happened has shaken the trust that many had in the archdiocese as an institution. Trust cannot be regained in a moment but over time by doing the right things for the right reasons, one challenge or opportunity at a time. Know that what we are doing today as an archdiocese is for the right end and for the right reasons. It is clear that our recent journey as an archdiocese has been along a difficult path. My hope is that the major step we are taking together today will set us on firm ground so that we can focus our attention once more on our primary mission to preach the truth of our Catholic faith in both word and in deed.

I need also offer sincere thanks to Bishop Richard Lennon for his extraordinary efforts in directing this reconfiguration process. He has put in untold hours over the past few months to make this reconfiguration possible. That the reconfiguration process worked so well is largely due to him and we are all very grateful. To the thousands of priests, deacons, and lay men and women who gathered on the cluster levels, to the vicars, the regional bishops, the lay men and women and clergy on the central committee, to the members of the presbyteral council, I say thank you as well. This process has clearly shown that consultation among all the peoples of our archdiocese, laity and clergy, is something we all value and something that can obviously produce good results. The thoughtful advice and pastoral sensitivity that characterized the discussions in the central committee and the priest's council were truly edifying. In twenty years as a bishop I never felt more connected with my priests' council than I did as we agonized together over parish closings.

Please do not interpret reconfiguration as a defeat. It is rather a necessary reorganization for us to be positioned for the challenges of the future, so that the Church can be present in every area of the Archdiocese with the human and material resources we need to carry on the mission that Christ has entrusted to us.

I appeal to every Catholic in the Archdiocese to accept these changes in the spirit of faith. I am calling on everyone to make the sacrifices necessary for the good of our Church. A crisis tends to bring out the best and worst in people. I hope that this time of crisis will help us to focus on what is essential, our fidelity to Christ and our connectedness to each other in His Church.

The Church of Boston has a great history forged in persecution and sacrifice. We will have a great future if we do not flee from the cross. Reach out to one another in prayerful support. Let our love for our faith help us overcome our pain and help us focus on our mission.

As bishop in the West Indies, our islands were devastated by Hurricane Hugo. We were six months without electricity



and phones. I gathered with our priests and people amid rubble and said—“our buildings are strewn on the ground but we are on our feet.” We looked around us and saw a barren landscape, not a leaf or a bush left on the island. It looked as if there had been a forest fire, but the rains came and sun appeared in the sky and lush tropical foliage returned more stunning than ever. We should never underestimate God’s power to make all things new.

I am asking the Catholics of the Archdiocese to lay aside their anger and disappointment, to cast off their sadness and join hands with brothers and sisters across the Archdiocese. We need to be united, we need to help and support one another. It is not a time to foment divisions but a time to strengthen relationships and build a strong Church. The Lord is counting on us. We cannot let Him down. We are His people.

Most Reverend Sean P. O’Malley, O.F.M. Cap.

Archbishop of Boston

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