

December 16, 2003 - Archbishop O'Malley's address to priests of the archdiocese

Following is the text of the address to the assembled priests of the archdiocese by Archbishop Seán P. O'Malley delivered Dec. 16 at Boston College.

A rabbi friend of mine told me a story about a Hassidic preacher who was known for his dramatic preaching. One day, he ended his very moving talk by throwing his arms up in the air and declaring, "My God, in your presence I am as nothing," and he cast himself on the floor in front of the whole congregation. Immediately, his assistant, the cantor, inspired by the spectacle, threw his arms up in the air and said, "My God, in your presence I am as nothing," and he cast himself on the floor next to the rabbi. And then Mr. Schwartz, at the last pew of the congregation, got out to the main aisle and said, "My God, in your presence I am as nothing," and he threw himself on the floor. The rabbi elbowed the cantor and said, "Look who thinks he is nothing!"

We priests, like the good rabbi in the story, can at times be a little competitive. We are, of course, all united in our desire to serve God, but sometimes we want to serve God by ourselves or under our own terms. I am here today to say that it is only in serving God together that we will really serve Him. I am still trying to get my arms around this archdiocese. That is why I have called you here today. I want to talk to you about the settlement, and the issue of single sex unions and about reconfiguration; but I really want to talk to you first about being priests together. Alone we are nothing; together we are priests of Jesus Christ -- His eyes and mouth, His hands and His heart. Together we can do great things for the Lord.

I thank you for being priests and for all that you do for God's people. Your ministry is irreplaceable. I am grateful for all you do. I am grateful for the support you have given me since I arrived in Boston on July 30th.

I know that I let you down because the Red Sox lost the pennant. But I am glad that you have not given up on me and would venture out on a cold December day to be with me, knowing how busy you are.

Building priestly fraternity

We are in the process of restructuring the presbyteral council. We will now choose priests to represent the various vicariates. This arrangement is to allow the members of the presbyteral council to discuss with their brother priests in the vicariate the concerns that need to be taken to the presbyteral council. And, when we are discussing some topics at the presbyteral council, at times I will say: Please take this back to the vicariate meeting and see if there is a consensus.

I would like the presbyteral council to truly represent all the priests and to feel called to help build a consensus. To do this the vicariate meetings must be exercises in priestly fraternity that we take seriously. Priests must take time to come together and to minister to priests. At the Last Supper, the great commandment of love was directed first of all to priests. These are the brothers the Lord has given us. We must build priestly fraternity despite our diversity. We are not twins, but we are brothers. One vicar said a priest told him to tell the bishop to listen to the priests. I

want to do that, but you are many and often do not speak with one voice. I would like to see our vicariate meetings and presbyteral council become means of building consensus and discerning God's will. We must all be committed to these goals.

I am so grateful to the auxiliary bishops and the vicars for the work they do in building priestly fraternity and for their willingness to help me in trying to revitalize our vicariate meetings and presbyteral council. This will work only to the degree that all of us are willing to make it work. It will take time and effort on our part. Our goal is not just efficiency in administration but also building a sense of connectedness among priests and bishops in a large and diverse presbyterate.

I shall not abdicate my responsibility to make the hard decisions. Since coming to Boston, I have had to make the hardest decisions of my life. Here I am constantly faced with dilemmas and every decision is fraught with problems. But I promise you that I will always try to make the decision that is best for the Church, not the one that is easiest for me.

I used to think that the Franciscan ideal of poverty was to own nothing: That, of course, was before I knew what it was like to be \$135 million in debt, which is the total of our present loans plus what we owe the Knights of Columbus.

You have been invited here today as my closest collaborators so that I can inform you personally about the legal settlement that the archdiocese is about to make to compensate the victims of clerical sexual abuse. In light of the recent Supreme Judicial Court decision concerning same sex marriage, I wish to take a few minutes today to speak about my concerns with that decision. I also want to appeal to you for your help in moving forward with the process of reconfiguration that was started years ago but which needs to continue.

Funding the settlement

First, a word about the settlement.

When we abandoned the process of trying to settle with the victims and the insurance companies simultaneously, we did so with the recognition that the funds would need to be borrowed initially and the commitment that the settlements themselves would not be funded with parish or appeal funds. Both the borrowing and the identification of sources of repayment proved very difficult.

We have taken out three loans totaling \$97.5 million. Ninety million dollars will be used to make the victim payments under the October settlement agreement, pay the costs of the settlement process, settle a handful of pre-July cases of unrepresented victims and deal with the 11 opt-out cases. The other \$7.5 million will refinance the existing debt of St. John's Seminary.

The largest loan made to the archdiocese is for \$75 million. Citizens Bank is the agent, and Century Bank is participating. It is a two-year term loan. We are grateful to both of these institutions for recognizing the great social justice that this loan makes possible and for working in a speedy and professional manner to help us meet the Dec. 22 deadline.

That loan and the other two were difficult to put together, because, as you know, the archdiocese has been losing money for some time. To make this loan possible, the archdiocese had to pledge its right to receive insurance proceeds. St. John's Seminary guaranteed the loan, pledging its real estate as collateral; \$25 million dollars of the loan was personally guaranteed by an anonymous and generous individual who is committed to the community and his Church. I wish to express my gratitude to the trustees of St. John's Seminary and to the benefactor for their collaboration.

The second loan, also to the archdiocese, was made by the Clergy Retirement and Disability Trust. That loan is for \$15 million and is a three-year term loan. It is secured by the [Holy Cross] Cathedral Parish real estate and is subordinated to the loan from the banks. It is a legitimate arms-length loan and will be returned in three years with interest. As you know, the clergy fund has been under-funded and the Clergy Fund Committee has added \$10 million to the clergy fund in the last six months. I am just as committed to repay this new loan to the Retirement and Disability Trust and make this fund grow to be commensurate to the needs of our aged priests.

The final loan is a refinancing of the outstanding debt of St. John's Seminary. It is a three-year term loan secured by a second mortgage on a portion of the seminary's land. The loan is an alternative investment for a portion of the Cemetery Association's Perpetual Care fund.

All three loans will be repaid by funds that will not impact our daily work. Without assigning dollar values to each, there will be two sources of funds used to repay the loans. The first will be recoveries from the insurance companies. No specifics are available on the amount of these recoveries at this time. As you know, discussions about the responsibility of the insurance companies have taken a backseat to the settlements process which has consumed a great deal of effort.

The second source of funding will be the sale of approximately 27.6 acres of the Brighton campus. The land we intend to offer for sale is owned about one third by the archdiocese and two thirds by Saint John's Seminary. It consists of the land on the right hand side of the driveway as you enter the campus and includes the fields to the right of the driveway to the main gate on Lake Street and behind the main seminary building. We have not established a price for the land and we do not expect that process will conclude until some time in the spring when our real estate professionals finish exploring the comparable sales for large tracts of land in the city of Boston.

Without attaching specific amounts to these two sources of funds, which are available to us only because of the settlement and will not burden our parishes, suffice it to say that we believe that, when combined, they will be adequate to repay the debt.

We have gone the rather complicated route of arranging the loan to achieve the settlement so as to avoid having to rush to settle with the insurance companies and so as not to rush to sell the land. We need to maximize the proceeds from these two resources -- they are really all the archdiocese has. I am sure that you can see from this brief description how complicated it has been to make these short term loans in such large amounts.

I am anxious for you to explain to your parishioners that the settlement will be paid for from the sale of the Archbishop's house and adjacent property and from insurance money -- not from

parish assets or diocesan or parish collections. Parishioners need to hear this from you. Words are not enough to express our gratitude to the members of the finance committee and especially to our Chancellor, Mr. David Smith, without whose hard work and genius this financing would not have been possible.

The institution of marriage

Now, I would like to turn our attention to another topic; namely, the institution of marriage in light of the recent Supreme Judicial Court decision.

Several weeks ago, I was asked to speak to a group of Protestant and Jewish religious leaders on the topic of same-sex marriage. The Church's approach to these social issues is much different from most Protestants, especially those of the evangelical traditions. And although we may coincide in our conclusions, the Catholic approach incorporates the natural law and the overriding principle of seeking the common good that takes into account the pluralistic society in which we live. Nevertheless, the talk was very well received by the ecumenical community.

To my great surprise The [Boston] Globe had the talk transcribed and printed it in its entirety in the first section of their paper the very next day.

For the first Sunday of Advent, I sent a letter, to be read at all the Masses, signed by the four diocesan bishops of the commonwealth in reaction to the court's recent decision. I know that the timing was difficult, being the first Sunday of Advent and the weekend of Thanksgiving. Still, I was disappointed to hear that a message that was so warmly received by the ecumenical community and left uncensored by the Globe went unread by some of our priests.

I realize that not all of our people would be happy to hear the letter. In part that is due to our failure, yours and mine, to catechize our own people whose values are shaped more by TV sitcoms than by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A few years ago there was a play on Broadway called "Mass Appeal." The two characters were a pastor and his young curate. When the young priest preached, he rained down lightning bolts on the congregation. The pastor, on the other hand, never challenged anybody, striving to be Mr. Popularity. Both approaches are wrong and are a betrayal of our mission, which is to preach the truth with humility and love.

As a young priest I was preaching on the Independence Day of Argentina to a full cathedral -- diplomats and military personnel. I preached on the Church's social Gospel and the immoral practices of the security state, of tortures and forced disappearances and other violations of human rights. The entire church got up and rushed to the doors. I knew they were not all going to the bathroom at once. As I ended the sermon to an audience of one, a young Argentine soldier who was serving the Mass, I thought to myself, "If they have not left this one behind to shoot me, I will get to work on Easter Island."

I was comforted when the cardinal told the rector of the cathedral -- when Father Seán preaches take up the collection before the Gospel.

That was probably the most difficult sermon I have ever given -- but I have never regretted it. Even though at the time some said I was a communist. But after that day, a number of soldiers and diplomats came to me secretly because of their own crises of conscience. Later on, two presidents were arrested and one is still imprisoned in Argentina.

We must preach the Gospel in season and out of season. If a redefinition of marriage is enshrined in the law of the commonwealth, it will be a tragedy for the entire country. And if it happens because of our cowardice or inertia, we shall have to answer before God.

Marriage, as an essential institution oriented toward the rearing of children, needs to be strengthened for the good of society. The tendency of separating having children and being married has already had a very damaging effect on our society. All studies have shown that the best venue for child rearing is a stable, permanent relationship between a man and a woman.

This should not be interpreted as discriminatory. Every adult person has the right to marry, but marriage means marrying someone of the opposite sex. It is grossly unfair that a court decision, decided by one vote, should be allowed to cause such damage to the institution of marriage.

In February there will be an important vote in our state legislature paving the way for a constitutional amendment. It is crucial that we encourage our people to call on our elected officials to defend the institution of marriage. This should not be seen as an attack on homosexual persons, but we must appeal to all peoples to defend the definition of marriage for the good of society. A strong institution of marriage does not hurt anyone and it helps everyone. A weakened institution of marriage causes a great harm to all of society. In no way should this be seen as promoting homophobia or cruel prejudices against members of our community; but we must call on all Catholics to be Catholic and to do the right thing, to safeguard the institution of marriage.

The National Marriage Project, run by Rutgers University, brings out an annual "State of Our Unions" report. In this year's report they state: "Marriage is a fundamental social institution. It is central to the nurture and raising of children. It is the social glue that reliably attaches fathers to children. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and children and thus to the nation as a whole."

Marriage has been from time immemorial and into recent history an institution designed to unite men and women in the shared tasks of child rearing. The possibility or presence of children is the key reason why the state and society treat marriage differently from other intimate partnerships. In our country today, there is a shift in the meaning and purpose of marriage away from children and toward adults. Chief among these changes is the weakening connection between marriage as a couple relationship and marriage as a parental partnership. This has taken a terrible toll on society. One third of the children in our country are born out of wedlock. Fathers in these situations are typically absent or participate in the raising of the children to a far lesser degree than fathers who are married.

Last week a French news periodical, L'Express, showed the latest statistics in Europe. In Greece, Serbia and Poland the number of children born out of wedlock is still small whereas in France and England it is around 40 percent. In some Scandinavian countries, the majority of children are born out of wedlock.

In the minds of many young Americans, the connection between marriage and parenthood is fading. The legalization of same-sex marriages will only serve to weaken the connection and thus contribute to the deterioration of the American family.

It is too easy to ignore children's interests in marriage when marriage is defined simply as a couple relationship. "Yet children have a compelling stake in their parents' marriage. It is a source of social and economic advantage for them. It provides a reliable means of attaching their fathers to the family household over the long term. It brings together under one roof the two people who have brought them into the world and who have a mutual interest in their well being." (National Marriage Project, "State of Our Unions Report": Rutgers University)

All of American society has a huge stake in creating a culture where marriage is reconnected to parenthood and where married parents are encouraged, supported and valued for their long-term commitment to marriage and family.

On parish reconfiguration

The third topic that I want to address with you is reconfiguration. I hope that everyone realizes that the cost of the settlement has nothing to do with the challenge of parish closings and reconfiguration. The need to close parishes is brought about for other reasons, most of them quite independent of the sex abuse scandal. The upside of closing parishes is that the surviving parishes should be stronger, more able to respond to peoples' needs, better staffed and with more resources for ministry.

Reconfiguration is not about closing the 50 parishes that cannot pay their bills. No, we need to analyze the needs of the Church and keep parishes where there is a need, even when this means subsidizing parishes. Special regard must be given to the new immigrants who have cultural needs, linguistic and otherwise. We need to do all we can to protect our Catholic schools and strengthen them.

With 50 parishes that cannot pay their bills, and with many other parishes that are surviving by depleting their savings, our pension and insurance programs are at risk. Difficult decisions need to be made in order to turn the situation around. Priests, parish councils and finance councils need to share their parish information with neighboring parishes in order to understand the need for reconfiguration and to arrive at the best possible suggestions for the entire faith community, not just what seems to be best for a single parish.

In my grandfather's generation of Irish people, they got married in their thirties when they had saved a little money. My grandfather actually built a house he gave to my grandmother as a wedding gift. The street was named after him. That house was the center of family for three generations. How many Sunday dinners, birthdays, Christmases and Thanksgivings, baptisms

and wakes took place there. But then the children moved out, my grandfather died, and Nana came and lived with us. The house was sold. It was a sad day no one wanted to see, but that grand old house that served us so well more than fulfilled its purpose. We will always cherish the wonderful memories of so many events that took place there. But today the needs of our family are different and those needs required us to sell the homestead; to do otherwise would not have been responsible.

There is no painless dentistry. I know that people are loath to close a beloved parish and parish church. But we must help our parishioners to see that it is because of the needs of our family that we make these painful sacrifices. And that out of these sacrifices can come stronger Catholic parishes better equipped to carry on the work of evangelization, to reach our young people, to serve our shut-ins, and to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, to pass on the faith to future generations.

We must not deny our people the right to mourn the loss of a parish and a church building, but we need to challenge them to make great sacrifices for an even greater good. The future of our ability as a Church to minister in the archdiocese depends on our willingness to make the sacrifices necessary for reconfiguration.

I have closed enough parishes in my years as a bishop to know that so much depends on the leadership of the parish priests. Where pastors explain the reasons for this and give parishioners a sense of hope and excitement over the possibility of forming stronger communities, closures have been very successful.

Unfortunately, we have all seen what can happen when a pastor resists and engages in passive-aggressive behavior that immediately infects the whole parish community with a spirit of despair.

Now more than ever we must see ourselves not as free agents, but as part of a presbyterate that has the responsibility of working together with their bishop to promote the mission of the Church. Jesus Christ has told us: "As the Father sent me, so I send you." We are sent, we are earthen vessels carrying treasures -- the treasures of our faith, our fellowship, our sacraments and our mission. We are sent now in this set of circumstances, in this time of crisis and scandal. Now is our time. It is not a time of great peace and prosperity in the history of our Church, but it is our time and we must shoulder the cross right now.

Many of us went to the seminary at a time of a strong Catholic culture and family life. I did not know anyone who was divorced when I was a teenager. Everyone went to Mass. I remember in the seminary reading an interview that they published of Flannery O'Connor, about being a Catholic in the South. She recalled how as a young girl she invited one of her baptist girl friends to come to Mass with her. She was very excited about this. After Mass, Flannery couldn't wait to ask her, "What do you think?" She said "Oh, you Catholics -- I'm really impressed. The sermon was so boring, the music was so bad, but all those people were there."

Many Catholics no longer go to Mass every Sunday. Some send their children to CCD but do not see the reason to bring their children to be part of a worshipping community. Could we have ever

imagined the direction our culture would have taken or the troubles that would beset our Church? But precisely because of the challenges we face, our role as priests is more crucial than ever to rebuild the Church.

As a bishop in the West Indies, I experienced the horror of a terrible hurricane. We were left without phones, electricity and water for six months. Most of our buildings were destroyed or severely damaged. Insurance did not begin to cover what was needed. I told the people our churches and schools have blown down, but we are on our feet.

I called the pastors together and said I wanted to open the schools as soon as possible. Many of them just moaned, but one pastor, who had always given me the most problems, said: "Bishop, let's do it." Within a couple of weeks we opened the schools in tents and under trees. The public schools were closed for over a year.

Sometimes we just have to rise to the occasion. The present is one such occasion. It calls us to pull together and support one another. It is going to be a very hard time for many parishioners. We must listen to them and reassure them. We must consult with our lay leadership and hear their wisdom, but we must also allay their fears. Our Holy Father is always quoting the Gospels: "Be not afraid."

The priestly vocation: 'friends of the Bridegroom'

Love casts out fear. Our love for Christ, for the priesthood, for His people will help us to overcome our own fears and to place our trust in Him who has sent us to be His compassionate presence in the world. Love must define us as priests. The metaphor I always favor for the priest's special vocation is a phrase found on the lips of John the Baptist and of our blessed Savior -- "the friend of the Bridegroom." When they asked John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, he said: "I am not the Messiah." (As priests we may often have a Messiah complex.) John the Baptist says, "I am but the friend of the Bridegroom." And when the Pharisees complain that Christ's disciples do not fast, Jesus says: "How can the friends of the Bridegroom fast while the Bridegroom is with them?"

Scripture scholars tell us that the term "friend of the bridegroom" is like the best man in the wedding party. Jesus is the Bridegroom, not the widower. He does not exist separate from the Church. To love Jesus is to love the Church.

The friend of the Bridegroom, the "Padrino," the best man, the "compadre" is the confidant, the one who is bonded to the Bridegroom. The best man, the friend of the Bridegroom is also devoted to the Bride. He is the protector and the promoter of the love that links the Bridegroom and the Bride, Christ and the Church. A priest is Jesus' best friend and loves Jesus' Bride the Church.

To be a friend of the Bridegroom requires a deep life of prayer. I once again appeal to all of you to make prayer the cornerstone of your ministry. It is in prayer that we enter into friendship with Christ. He becomes alive to us. It is in prayer that we find healing for our own brokenness and where we find the generosity to bear one another's burdens.

Sometimes priests are divided in subtle ways: by a sense of competition, by one-upmanship or by ideological preferences. We must try to overcome these things, become friends of the Bridegroom and friends of the other friends of the Bridegroom. In unity we will find strength. In disunity we will suffer and grow weaker and our mission will be diminished. The choice is ours. I invite you to join with me as your bishop and to be a united presbyterate as we face this very significant event in our archdiocese for the rebuilding of the Church.

One of the great strengths of the Catholic priesthood has always been obedience. It is so counter-cultural in a society where freedom and autonomy are the absolute values and goals. But our devotion to freedom in American society often undermines our quest to build a civilization of love.

For us believers, obedience is an event. It is the kenosis of Jesus -- He emptied Himself, took on the form of a slave and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Like the Centurion, I am a man of obedience. My vow of obedience brought me here despite my cowardice and tepidity. I feel like Gideon pitted against the might of the Midianites -- but I know the Church is Christ and we must serve Christ.

On the day of our ordination, filled with youthful enthusiasm and love for Christ, we all make a promise of obedience. Today I call upon you to allow that obedience to meld us together as one presbyterate, putting aside ideologies and petty differences and saying "yes" to the Lord who says -- "Rebuild my Church."

Reading the signs of the times

We must be committed to what is the best for the Church. What is best for the Church of Boston -- not what is best for Friar Seán or for Msgr. Bill or Father Jack. What is best for the Church of Boston. We need strong, well-staffed parishes -- we cannot fail to read the signs of the times that demand that we take decisive action in light of the present needs of the Church. Not to do so would be to court disaster in the not-so-distant future. The resources of the Church are not means or an end in themselves, but are directed toward the mission of the Church -- salvation. We can become so attached to one thing or one place that we lose sight of this. Reconfiguration allows us to use our resources -- human, monetary and physical -- so that the work of Christ may flourish.

We are all well aware of the reasons and the situations that have brought about the need for reconfiguration:

Changes in demographics: People have moved to the suburbs, they are having fewer children, there are fewer regular church-goers.

The priest shortage: As an aside here, it is my intention in a very short time to appoint two part-time vocation directors to work with Father Oscar Pratt. We need more than the 43 seminarians we have right now. This is also your work as well. I ask all of you to invite young men to consider a vocation. In all studies, a priest who invites is the number one vocation-getter.

The financial difficulties faced by many parishes: As Bishop [Richard] Lennon made clear to you on June 17th, there are too many parishes that cannot make payroll or pay benefits for employees.

The current poor state of many of our properties: We have just completed a review of all church properties in the City of Boston, approximately one-seventh of the total number of buildings in [the archdiocese]. We would need at least \$104 million just to bring these buildings up to an acceptable standard of usability.

I have been discussing this with the auxiliary bishops since last August and last month with the Cabinet and the vicars. Today I discuss it with you, my representatives and co-workers to the people of God in 357 parishes.

Logistics for reconfiguration

Since my arrival in Boston, I have heard from many of you, my brother priests, that you recognize and understand why reconfiguration is necessary.

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 process begins, I offer you these first principles:

- Reconfiguration will involve a substantial number of parishes.
- No parishes have been designated for closure. The number of parishes to be closed has not yet been determined.
- Reconfiguration will involve more than merely those parishes unable to pay their bills.

Allow me to briefly outline the sequence of events which I envision as the process of reconfiguration moves forward.

Early in January 2004, I plan to address a letter to all the faithful announcing the reconfiguration initiative and placing it within the context of an archdiocesan-wide effort to rebuild our Church. At that time, I will provide a fuller outline of the process for this undertaking. However, since I am relying on all of you priests to be my collaborators in this work and my presence carrying the message to the people and helping them through these efforts, let me briefly tell you the process and who will be involved.

The regional bishops, the vicars, the pastors, priests and deacons will all be involved and asked to give their input. Also, I very much desire and expect that lay staffs and the parish pastoral council and finance council members be involved in the conversations, and that there be opportunity for parishioners to be heard -- this is the work of the whole Church.

On the archdiocesan level, a central committee is being established under the chairmanship of Bishop Lennon with priestly and lay membership from each of the regions, along with a few

personnel from the central offices. I look forward to working with and receiving counsel from this committee as I prepare to announce in March the specific areas, the groupings of parishes, wherein there will be need for reconfiguration. As I noted a few moments ago, along with a specific mandate to a group of parishes (for example, that three parishes in this town need to become two parishes), there will be a date noted by which the recommendation from the parishes is to be sent to the regional bishop and then on to me. Again, the central committee will be advising me as I prepare to take the recommendations to the presbyteral council for its hearing.

I envision a number of conversations will be occurring during the course of the reconfiguration process. At various times, these conversations will involve myself, Bishop Lennon, the regional bishops, the vicars, the conveners of clusters, the faithful of the parishes and all interested parties in those areas that will be asked to bring forward recommendations for change. 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.

Practical directives

To underscore the importance and seriousness of this archdiocesan-wide effort, I am announcing the following decisions effective today:

- No new pastors will be named or reappointed until this effort is completed -- administrators will be named to parishes that experience a loss of their pastors during this time.
- No parish capital fund-raising campaigns will be allowed to begin until this effort is completed.
- No extraordinary initiatives in parishes (such as buying or selling of properties, new building construction or additions to present buildings, renovations to existing buildings, except in the case of safety issues) will be allowed to begin until this effort is completed.

In my judgment, given the seriousness and scope of what is envisioned, it would send conflicting messages not to institute these three directives.

I realize that particular situations may arise which on the local parish level may seem to call for special consideration regarding the second and third directives. While I hope there is not a flood of special consideration requests, I realize I need to provide a mechanism for them to have a hearing and decision. Thus, any parish that feels they need a hearing regarding the second or third directive is asked to submit their request to Mr. David Smith, the Chancellor, who in turn will pass it on to Bishop Lennon, who will make a decision regarding a waiver to the above-mentioned directive.

As we move forward with the reconfiguration effort, it will become evident that some parishes will be continuing as is. As this unfolds, the second and third directive mentioned above will be lifted for those parishes.

Timeline for reconfiguration

To recap, let me present the following summary timeline:

- Early January: Letter released announcing reconfiguration to the entire diocese.
- Mid-January to mid-February: Bishops and vicars meet with priests inviting them to gather in clusters to formulate suggestions for reconfiguration in their area; parish staffs and lay representatives to be involved in these conversations.
- Late February: Regional bishops forward suggestions from above along with their recommendations to me.
- Mid to late March: After consulting with the Central Committee and other advisors, I announce the areas that will be subject for reconfiguration. With the announcements there will be clear mandates indicating first the desired outcome of the local conversation leading to a suggestion, e.g., three parishes are to become two, and then the suggestion from the designated area parishes is to be forwarded to me.
- The conclusions of the area discussions will be staggered so that all are not coming in at once and being implemented at once. The first group will report their suggestions in light of my mandate by June 1, 2004; the second group by Aug. 1, 2004; the third group by Oct. 1, 2004.

Conclusion: Together with Him

I need your leadership in this painful undertaking of reconfiguration. At the end of the day I am personally convinced this process will strengthen us and allow us to fulfill our mission more fruitfully. I appreciate that I am asking much of you. It will not be easy for you; it will not be easy for me. People will be disappointed, angry and hurt. Yet we have already closed 48 parishes in the last 18 years, and the people have remained faithful; we should be bolstered by this.

Being a good priest is not easy, it never has been. Being a good priest alone is impossible. We need to do it together. In the Gospels, Jesus calls the disciples together to be with Him. Their being close to the Lord molded a band of fishermen into Apostles who overcame their fears and limitations and laid down their lives just as their master had done. Now it is our turn to be called together so that we can be sent out to be shepherds after His own heart. We face great challenges, but we are not alone. We must be strong in our faith life so that we can help our people. Prayer and fraternity must be the hallmark of our presbyterate.

Thank you for being priests. Thank you for being priests together.

Thank you for being here today. Thank you for your patience.

May this Christmastide be filled with the peace and light that comes to us from Jesus who reveals the Father's love in the face of a Child. Merry Christmas, Blessed New Year.

Most Reverend Sean P. O'Malley, OFM Cap.
Archbishop of Boston