

# Reconfiguration planned in Boston

Meghan Dorney/CNS

BOSTON — In a much anticipated meeting Dec. 16 with priests of the archdiocese, Boston Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley outlined a process for closing dozens of parishes, with the first coming as early as June.

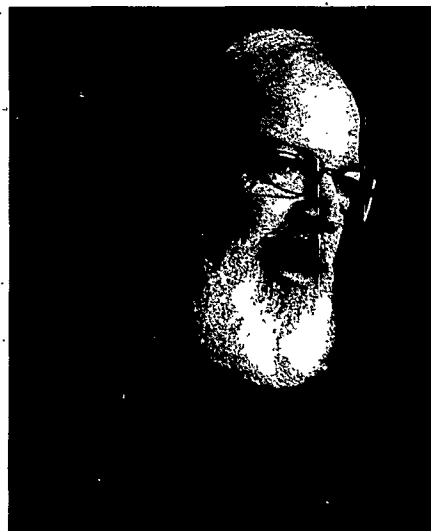
He also called on priests to be unified in supporting the reconfiguration process.

It was the first time in more than 25 years that all priests in the archdiocese had been summoned to such a meeting with the archbishop. Approximately 600 priests attended.

Archbishop O'Malley spoke about funding recent clergy abuse settlements and same-sex marriage in addition to the "reconfiguration" of the 357 parishes in the archdiocese.

Because of changes in demographics, a shortage of priests, a decrease in regular Mass attendance and the financial difficulties and disrepair of many parishes, a "substantial number of parishes" will have to close, said Archbishop O'Malley.

He noted many parishes are unable to make payroll or pay health-insurance benefits for their employees and that a recent archdiocesan review of all church properties in



Reuters/CNS

**Boston Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley speaks about future parish closings and consolidations at a press conference Dec. 16 following his meeting with priests of the archdiocese.**

Boston found that at least \$104 million is needed for repairs.

The archbishop stressed that closings would involve more than just financially troubled parishes. "Special consideration" will be given to

parishes serving immigrant communities and parishes with schools.

"Reconfiguration is not about closing the 50 parishes that cannot pay their bills," Archbishop O'Malley explained. "We need to analyze the needs of the church and keep parishes where there is a need, even when this means subsidizing parishes."

Over the past 18 years, the archdiocese has closed 48 parishes based on weekly Mass attendance, baptisms, marriages and funerals. Archbishop O'Malley said these considerations will be applied during this process of reconfiguration.

He said decisions will be the result of a process of consultation with bishops, priests and lay people.

A central committee on reconfiguration will be established under Auxiliary Bishop Richard G. Lennon, vicar general, and will be comprised of priests and lay people from each of the five regions of the archdiocese.

In mid-January, bishops and vicars will meet in clusters with priests, parish staffs and lay people to generate suggestions for parish closings in their area.

In late February, regional bishops will relay their suggestions to the archbishop. The following month, he will announce specific geographic areas in need of reconfiguration and will issue a mandate that, for example, three parishes should become two. A deadline will be included by which recommended solutions must be sent to their regional bishop.

The first parish group will report their suggestions by June 1, the second by Aug. 1 and the third by Oct. 1.

The archbishop also announced that until the reconfiguration process is complete no new pastors

will be named or reappointed, no parish fund-raising campaigns can begin and no construction or renovations to church property are allowed.

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

Acknowledging that closing parishes is a "painful undertaking," the archbishop stated, "The upside of closing parishes is that the surviving parishes should be stronger, more able to respond to people's needs, better staffed and with more resources for ministry," he said.

The archbishop also explained the sources of loans that will fund the settlement and announced that he is in the process of reconstituting the Presbyteral Council.

At a press conference following the gathering, Archbishop O'Malley stressed that parish closings are not a direct result of the cost of the settlements but that closings were "accelerated" by these high costs.

"Most priests would tell you that there is an ongoing need for reconfiguration," said Father Paul O'Brien, pastor at St. Patrick Parish in Lawrence, where there are currently seven Catholic churches.

Many priests were also encouraged by the archbishop's call to unity and "priestly fraternity." Among them was Father Robert Bullock, pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows in Sharon and president of the Boston Priests Forum.

"So many priests are living isolated lives in parish rectories," said Father Bullock. "There is a need for priests to minister to each other."

## Abuse victims receive payments

WASHINGTON (CNS) — A major chapter in the Catholic clergy sexual-abuse scandal ended in late December as lawyers distributed settlement checks to 541 victims of Boston archdiocesan priests from the \$85 million settlement pool the archdiocese set up to meet their claims.

Under the settlement, 19 arbitrators awarded victims amounts ranging from \$80,000 to \$300,000, depending on the duration and severity of the abuse. Final decisions on allocating the money were made Dec. 19, and settlement checks were distributed beginning Dec. 22.

"We hope that the conclusion of this phase of the settlement will provide survivors and their loved ones

with some measure of healing and peace," said Boston Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley. "We understand that no sum of money can adequately compensate them for the suffering they have endured."

The archdiocese mortgaged its cathedral and seminary to provide immediate funds for the payments. It announced plans to sell the archbishop's mansion and about half the 60-acre property it sits on to help repay the mortgages. It also expects to recoup a substantial portion of the settlement debt from its insurance carriers.

Several alleged victims who did not participate in the settlement intend to take their cases to court and seek a jury award.

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