

Boston parishes now up for sale

Christine Tolfree/CNS

BOSTON — Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley of Boston put the properties of 16 closed parishes up for sale in mid-November, but gave six parishes that were slated to close an extension on their closing date.

Writing to Catholics of the archdiocese, the archbishop explained that the harsh measures he has taken are necessary to address declining Mass attendance, the priest shortage and financial woes that are "worse than most people realize."

In the wake of the clergy sexual-abuse scandal that has enveloped the archdiocese since 2001, the archdiocese has suffered a 50-percent loss in income, he said.

He also cited a growing shortage of priests, contrasting the 50 to 60 new priests ordained yearly a half-century ago with the seven ordained this year. "Over 100 of our present pastors are in their 70s or 80s," he wrote.

"If difficult decisions are not made now, the mission of the church will be seriously compromised in the

future," he wrote.

In May, at the end of a five-month planning process, Archbishop O'Malley announced the closing of 70 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes.

Forty-seven parishes were closed by mid-November, and a revised reconfiguration calls for a total of 83 parishes and 67 churches to be closed. Of the other 16 churches, eight will serve new parishes created in the reconfiguration and eight will remain open as worship sites operated by a neighboring parish.

The closings have met significant resistance. By early November parishioners in seven closed parishes and one slated for closing were staging round-the-clock protests. The archdiocese generally allowed the sit-ins to continue peacefully, saying it is committed to dialogue.

But Eugene Sweeney, 69, was arrested at Immaculate Conception Church in Winchester when he refused to leave the church following its closing Mass Nov. 6. He was the only parishioner who stayed and the pastor, Father Thomas Foley, said he asked police to remove Sweeney be-



Gregory L. Tracy/CNS

The Archdiocese of Boston sold the archbishop's former residence (above) and some surrounding land to pay a portion of its \$85 million clergy sexual-abuse settlement. Sixteen closed parishes are also up for sale.

cause he was concerned about his safety if he stayed in church alone.

The archdiocese said that decision represented the pastor's personal judgment, not a change in archdiocesan policy. On Nov. 15 the archdiocese formally declined to press charges against Sweeney.

In his Nov. 13 letter Archbishop O'Malley said he understands that he must "do a better job explaining" the reasons for reconfiguration.

The clergy abuse settlements

"have been paid in great part by the sale of the archbishop's residence and adjacent property, as well as by insurance," but the scandal caused a 50-percent reduction of annual income, he wrote.

"Subsidies to poor parishes, ethnic apostolates, formation programs and Catholic schools are all affected. Many parishes are unable to pay their bills. The pension plans for laity and clergy are in danger," he said.

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Seneca County schools to merge

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Bishop Matthew H. Clark has approved the consolidation of St. Patrick's School in Seneca Falls and St. Mary's School in Waterloo. The two facilities, which are the only Catholic schools in Seneca County, will consolidate after completion of the 2004-05 school year.

Talk of consolidation began in December 2003, when teachers, parents and the principals from both schools formed a joint committee to discuss their options in light of declining enrollment and related budgetary concerns in both schools, officials said.

Over the course of almost a year, the joint committee looked at the enrollment and budget statistics of each school, as well as the conditions of the two buildings. The committee also considered how a consolidated school might be able to offer additional programs and services and attract new students.

Both schools currently offer preschool through eighth-grade programs. St. Patrick's currently has 117 students, while St. Mary's has 128 students. St. Patrick's was built in 1879, and St. Mary's was official-

ly established in 1904.

In late October, the committee issued a recommendation for consolidation to the pastoral leaders of St. Patrick's and St. Mary's parishes, according to Father William Laird, pastor of St. Patrick's. Father Laird and Mercy Sister Kathleen O'Connell, pastoral administrator of St. Mary's, then shared the joint committee's recommendation with their parish communities.

"We shared with the parish what the committee had recommended, so there was opportunity for the parish in general to address that," Father Laird said, noting that he received no negative feedback from his parishioners.

After members of both parish and school communities were informed of the joint committee's recommendation, Father Laird and Sister O'Connell passed the committee's recommendation on to Bishop Clark. In a letter dated Nov. 1, they asked for his approval of the proposed consolidation. In mid-November, they received his response, indicating approval of the plan.

"I commend you, your school staff and parents, as well as your parishioners, for all of the efforts

that have led to this decision. Both St. Patrick's and St. Mary's have had a vibrant history of Catholic-school education," Bishop Clark's letter stated. "Like you, my chief concern is that the treasure of Catholic-school education be present in your area. Because of this, you have my full support for the consolidation of your two schools."

Parishioners of both churches were informed of the upcoming school consolidation at Masses the weekend of Nov. 20-21, Father Laird said, adding that the joint committee has not yet decided on a site for the new school.

"The principle had to be approved before the details were worked out," Father Laird said.

The joint committee planned to meet shortly after Thanksgiving to begin discussing some of those details, said Fred Smith, principal of St. Mary's School.

Selecting a site for the consolidated school, developing a budget to support it and enrolling children for the 2005-06 school year will be the next steps, Smith said, noting that a new staff — from the principal to the custodian — also will be hired.