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For Immediate Release

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Statement of Archbishop Seán P. O'Malley Regarding Reconfiguration

(Boston, Massachusetts) November 13, 2004...In a letter to all members of the Archdiocese of Boston, Archbishop Seán P. O'Malley today made the following statement:

“Dear Friends in Christ:

Much has been said and written about the process of reconfiguration since we began this necessary and painful work. As many of you know, I have been thinking long and hard about what we have done and how things could be done better. While every parish closing has brought sadness and for some heartbreak, some number of parishioners from several parishes have refused to leave their Church demonstrating their belief that their parish should not have closed. I hope you know how much these closings hurt me as I undertake them. It has become apparent that I must do a better job explaining to you the reasons for reconfiguration and the closing of parishes.

In the Acts of the Apostles we find the paradigm for the Catholic Community where people were united in the teaching of the Apostles, in fellowship, the breaking of the bread and in prayer. Those who had properties sold them and gave the proceeds to the Apostles who distributed to each one according to his or her needs.

The practice of the Early Church was an exercise in Christian solidarity, the community as a whole striving to meet the needs of all, often at personal sacrifice. On many occasions the people of our Archdiocese have risen to the challenge of this solidarity by responding to the needs of their brothers and sisters. As an Archdiocese we now face a need which can only be met by our coming together in the spirit of Christian solidarity for the good of our Church.

In my installation homily I spoke of the immigrants from Central America and how they washed dishes day and night and ate leftovers from the dirty plates to save as much money as possible to send to their relatives back home. Those workers could have had a more comfortable life and a little money in the bank, but the needs of those back home caused them to send every penny they could to help their families. There was a day when our families from Ireland, Italy, Poland, were doing the same. It is the logic of love. People made incredible sacrifices without hesitation.

In our Church family we are in a similar situation. We have experienced the heartache and demoralization of the sexual abuse crisis. The human and material resources that we took for granted are no longer there. The only way to avoid a catastrophic debacle is for us to downsize. We have more buildings and churches than we can afford to maintain. We have more parishes than we need to meet the pastoral and sacramental needs of our Archdiocese.

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I know that this process has been very painful, especially for communities which taken alone seemed “viable”. However, the truth is that no parish can be taken alone for all parishes are part of the Archdiocese of Boston and thus are related to one another. It is the present configuration of staffing and of parishes that is not viable, not now and not going forward into the future. Viability must be seen not at the parish level but at the level of the whole Archdiocese. The viability of the Church’s mission is at stake.

The decline in the number of priests is a serious problem. We need to work hard to promote vocations to priesthood. Five decades ago we were ordaining fifty or sixty priests a year for the Archdiocese of Boston. This year we ordained seven. Over 100 of our present pastors are in their 70’s or 80’s. We are blessed with fine men in the seminary, but they are few in number. Therefore all Catholics need to help promote vocations and pray for more good and holy priests, laborers for the Lord’s harvest.

The financial situation of the Archdiocese is much worse than most people realize. This is not so much a result of the settlements for the sexual abuse cases which have been paid in great part by the sale of the Archbishop’s Residence and adjacent property, as well as by insurance. The 50 % reduction of annual income to the diocese caused by the scandal has dealt a very serious blow to our local Church. At the same time troubles in the stock market that have adversely affected pension plans and retirement accounts across the country have left us with an unfunded pension liability of \$80 million.

The Archdiocese’s operating budget has been slashed by \$14 million over the past three years, and we still have an annual \$10 million deficit. Subsidies to poor parishes, ethnic apostolates, formation programs, and Catholic schools all are affected. Many parishes are unable to pay their bills. The pension plans for laity and clergy are in danger. \$35 million borrowed three years ago to pay operating expenses is exhausted and needs to be repaid. Many communities who meet their expenses do so by selling land and buildings and spending down savings. (In the last nine years parishes have sold 150 pieces of property mostly to pay bills). Some people think that reconfiguration will mean a great surplus of money for the Archdiocese. Unfortunately, this is not true. I have asked the Finance Council to work on a strategic plan for the Archdiocese which I shall share with you. I am committed to financial transparency and to using our human and financial resources for the mission of the Church.

I am appealing to all Catholics to be Catholics first. I know that we all have a great love for our parish and parish church, but our first love must be for Christ and the Body of Christ which is the Church. Closing parishes is the hardest thing I have ever had to do in forty years of religious life. I joined the monastery knowing that I would have to do difficult things for the rest of my life, but I never imagined I would have to be involved in anything so painful or so personally repulsive to me as this. At times I ask God to call me home and let someone else finish this job, but I keep waking up in the morning to face another day of reconfiguration. So when people ask why I am doing this, I can only say it is because I love the Church and want to give my life to the service of the Church. If difficult decisions are not made now, the mission of the Church will be seriously compromised in the future.

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The process is not easy, it is not perfect, but the dire circumstances we are in demand this reconfiguration. I am grateful to the countless number of parishioners and priests who have worked hard and made many sacrifices for the good of the Church. I am also indebted to the newly established committee which is reviewing what has been done and preparing comments and recommendations.

We should all be consoled to know that the sacrifices we make allow the mission of the Church to continue. If your “viable” parish was closed it was so some other “not viable” parish or ministry could continue. If your parish is a receiving parish, I urge you to go out of your way, as so many of you already have, to welcome those coming from another parish.

It is the call we all received in baptism that unites us in the Body of Christ. Like those first Christians who gathered in their homes and in the catacombs to celebrate the Eucharist, we gather around the altar for the “breaking of the bread”. At the altar there can be no strangers, no rivals, only friends, fellow disciples. Our attachment to Christ, our communion with Him affirms our connectedness to each other in the Church. The *Eucharistic Year* invites us to focus on what unites us. It is the Eucharist. Building strong Eucharistic communities for the future must be our goal. To do this we must all be willing to share who we are and what we have with one another. The very name Catholic reminds us that we are part of a universal community that looks beyond our individual parish to the local Church and the Church throughout the world.

We need to recognize and build on a unity that transcends our individual parishes and is based on a commitment to live the mission that Christ entrusts to us that begins with loving and forgiving one another. Our energy and passion should be to serve the needs of the poor and downtrodden, to teach our young people about the love of Christ and His Gospel. Past generations of Catholics in Boston have made untold sacrifices to establish parishes and institutions of which we have been the beneficiaries. Future generations of Catholics need our sacrifices so that they can inherit vibrant parishes and institutions in the future.

Discipleship has always meant the cross, but the cross is not the end. Out of the cross comes rebirth and resurrection. In this time of pain we must turn to prayer so that God will strengthen our faith and our faith will make us whole.

Each day I pray for all of you at the altar, especially for my brothers and sisters in the Church who are disappointed and angry. I pray that the unity Christ desired as the hallmark of his followers be ours. Only in unity can the Church’s mission flourish. We continue to pray at every Eucharist: “look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom.”

The Most Reverend Seán P. O’Malley, O.F.M., Cap.
Archbishop of Boston
November 13, 2004

The reconfiguration of parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston began in January of 2004, when there were 357 parishes divided into five regions. Since that time, 47 parishes have closed and other parish communities have welcomed those parishioners. When reconfiguration is completed, it is estimated that 83 parishes and 67 churches will have been closed, eight new parishes will have been created and eight churches will remain open as worship sites. This activity will result in 282 parishes and 290 churches serving the cities and towns that comprise the Archdiocese of Boston.

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