



Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley yesterday passed the ruins of Sacred Heart Church in Weymouth, which burned in a painful week for the archdiocese. (Globe Staff Photo / Tom Herde)

## O'Malley heartens reeling parish

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 13, 2005

WEYMOUTH -- As the hungry jaws of a wrecking machine paused from their demolition of the burned-out Sacred Heart Church yesterday, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley strode along the sun-soaked rubble that had been the church's nave, kissed the yellow cross that had been rescued from atop the steeple, and quietly recited a prayer from St. Francis.

O'Malley, after enduring the most disastrous week of his crisis-wracked tenure in Boston, then walked into the church's packed auditorium, its floors slickened by the humid air and its halls reeking of acrid smoke, and baptized a baby girl, declaring that even in the midst of pain, the church celebrates birth.

"How symbolic that in the face of destruction, and tragedy, and crisis, that there is new life, there is a new disciple," O'Malley said before baptizing 11-month-old Gianna Senices with water and then anointing her with chrism oil.

O'Malley, often at his most energetic while preaching, was clearly heartened by the packed crowd of supportive worshipers, among them scores of children, who gathered for Mass in the parish auditorium in Weymouth Landing. He greeted hundreds of worshipers before and after Mass, and agreed to multiple, albeit brief, interviews with the news media he had been avoiding for weeks.

But he acknowledged that the past week has been painful. The archbishop has been pilloried by politicians and parents for his abrupt decision to close a Brighton parochial school two days early to prevent a possible occupation by protesters. Then he faced the fire that destroyed the architecturally distinctive home of one of the most vibrant parishes in the archdiocese.

And the challenges are unlikely to end soon.

Even the fire served as a reminder of the controversy over O'Malley's decision to close nearly 80 parishes, because the archbishop now must decide whether to rebuild Sacred Heart, when in the past he has said Weymouth had too many parishes for its population. Eight closed parishes across the archdiocese are occupied around the clock by protesters staging "vigils." Priests and parishioners are concerned about proposed cuts in clergy retirement benefits. And today, O'Malley will meet for the first time with a group of Oak Square residents at the Our Lady of the

Presentation School, who for a year have been trying to persuade the archdiocese to sell them the closed school building. The residents have been staging a camp-in protest near the school in the wake of the early closing.

"It's been a very hard week -- a very sad week," O'Malley said in an interview with the Globe. "The way that things developed is not at all the way that we imagined. I certainly regret any pain that's been caused to people, but for us the occupation and the vigils in churches and possibly in the school are also very painful events for all the Catholics of the diocese, and there's also safety issues involved."

In his homily at Mass in the Sacred Heart auditorium, O'Malley did not pledge to rebuild the burned-down church, but said the parish, which boasts 15,000 parishioners from Weymouth and Braintree, would continue. He said the initial planning for the future will take place in conversations with the parish council, the parish finance council, and the church's pastor.

"It's a little early to forecast exactly what that plan will be, but we pray that everyone will work hard and use our best wisdom and come up with the best plan for the future of Sacred Heart parish so that this will continue to be a strong parish and will be a strong parish in the future," he said, to a standing ovation from about 800 people who attended the 11:30 a.m. Mass.

O'Malley had initially decided to close one of the five parishes in Weymouth -- the smallest, St. Albert the Great -- but after a six-month occupation by protesters he agreed to reverse that decision. St. Albert is still occupied by parishioners increasingly angry that the parish has not yet fully reopened nearly three months later.

But O'Malley said in the interview that he did not see the parish closings controversy in Weymouth affecting Sacred Heart.

"This is a big parish," he said. "I don't think there's any thought of closing this parish."

The cause of the fire that destroyed the church is still undetermined, State Fire Marshal Stephen Coan said yesterday. Coan said an investigative team consisting of members of the Weymouth police and fire departments, state troopers assigned to Coan's office, and agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and Explosives will return to the church today.

The pastor, the Rev. Daniel J. Riley, was clear that he hopes to rebuild.

"We are a great parish," he said to a standing ovation, "and we are going to rise."

Because most of the clerical vestments were burned, the priests wore borrowed robes, while an altar server, his alb having been consumed by fire, dressed in a blue T-shirt and blue gym shorts. Behind the makeshift altar in the auditorium sat the bronze tabernacle, rescued by firefighters, where the church stores consecrated wafers that Catholicism teaches have become the body of Jesus.

The Mass was bittersweet for many participants who were still grieving Thursday night's fire while relieved that no one was hurt. Some, including O'Malley, referred to the difficulty of replacing a building designed by Patrick C. Keely, a prominent 19th-century church architect.

"My husband and I grew up in this parish, we were baptized here and married here, and I buried my parents here," said Dawn Shanahan of Weymouth. "But I don't know [what the archdiocese should do now]. They can't reconstruct the building."

Others were clearer.

"I just told the archbishop: Rebuild!" said Pat Wiles of Braintree, one of the church's ushers. "We need the church."

In the lobby of the auditorium, children had drawn their thoughts about the fire on pieces of red, orange, yellow, blue, and green construction paper, many with sketches of chalices or crosses.

"I love Sacred Heart," wrote Joey Pietruszewski, who sketched the facade of the church in brown crayon, illuminated by streaks of yellow in the window.

"I hope the new Sacred Heart is the same as the old so I can make my first Holy Communion," wrote Elliot McLeod.

And, in an unsigned reminiscence, an anonymous illustrator declared, "I like how the church has coffee and donuts after the 9:30 a.m. Mass."

Michael Paulson can be reached at [mpaulson@globe.com](mailto:mpaulson@globe.com). Maria Cramer of the Globe staff contributed to this report. ■

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