

A Mass of healing on Boston Common

By John Hynes and Sheila Connors Grove | August 14, 2004

WHY WOULD lay persons want to sponsor a Mass on Boston Common -- a historic event -- in the midst of the turmoil that has characterized the Catholic Church in recent times? Is it to spotlight the pain of the parishes slated to close in the Archdiocese of Boston during the next six months? Is it to address the false hope of the assertion that the clergy sexual abuse crisis is history? Or is it in our nature as Catholics to gather together for healing and growth, to address our pain, and to celebrate the gifts we have been given?

The truth is, we have organized a Mass at 4 p.m. tomorrow for all of those reasons. The region's Catholics recognize that we have lived through the most extraordinary 30 months in the history of the church in the United States. We have endured revelations regarding decades of clergy sexual abuse resulting in the resignation of Cardinal Law, a divisive discussion regarding the role of marriage and women within Catholicism, and finally, a painful parish closings process resulting in the loss of dozens of parishes across the region.

However, in the face of this turbulence, we have witnessed the emergence of the laity, and a willingness by individuals to form organizations like Voice of the Faithful to take responsibility for their church.

Boston has become both a national symbol for mismanagement on the part of the hierarchy and a model for a pastoral and spiritual response on the part of the laity. And so, after these many months of pain and frustration, culminating in the closure of over 65 parishes, we are inviting Catholics to reclaim the essential gift of our faith.

Furthermore, we want to inspire Catholics to act -- to understand we also have a responsibility for the direction the church. There is much within Christ's message, and the Catholic tradition, that encourages positive action for reform. We hope to awaken Catholics to live their faith by taking action -- action to heal the church.

Additionally, the church has become increasingly polarized in the last several months, even while trying to deal with the failures that subjected thousands of young people across the country to the horror of sexual abuse. To solve the immense problems that the Catholic Church unquestionably faces, we must come together in unity and solidarity. And so, we are sponsoring this Mass to provide the kind of leadership necessary to bringing about a more unified church, but also one that is responsive and open to the guidance of the laity.

Finally, we chose to have this Mass because of the more than 65 parishes that are marked for closure. The lives of all Catholics within the Archdiocese of Boston will be touched by these closings -- those who will be losing their parishes, those who will be opening their churches to new members, and all others who worship at a Catholic church.

The immediate future of the archdiocese is, at best, uncertain. We are concerned that the unique social and cultural forces of Catholic Boston that have shaped the ideals of Catholic mayors,

governors, congressmen, senators, college presidents, businesspeople, ambassadors, and at least one president, as well as everyday Catholics, is dying. It is dying in an arduously long and painful process, and those who are charged to save it seem content to let it go rather than making those changes that would require them to be more accountable. And Voice of the Faithful, an organization formed out of this unique history, does not seek to hold a funeral, but to work for a rebirth as a responsibility of our faith.

We hope that this event will bring healing to Catholics in Boston and will provide a pastoral model to lay men and women around the world. It does not mean that we have forgotten the past two years or that we will not continue to shape structural reform so that never again will a child be in danger in a Catholic church. Indeed, our desire to promote the kind of structural change that will allow the laity to actively participate in the governance and guidance of the church leads us to help voice the concerns of those whose parishes are slated to close.

Furthermore, our goals -- to support survivors, support clergy of integrity, and to shape structural change -- will always form our mission. But we can reclaim our rituals, our traditions, and our faith. And this Mass represents the first step in doing so.

John Hynes and Sheila Connors Grove are members of the steering committee of Voice of the Faithful-Boston.

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