

Voice of faith is silenced

By Eileen McNamara,
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As an early snowfall blanketed Charlestown, he loaded a pickup with a few pieces of furniture and a couple of cardboard boxes bound for a friend's garage. Nothing of his own remains in the rectory but some clothes, some books, the beat-up recliner where he does his best thinking, and Ralph, the canine companion that just might be missed as much at St. Cat's as the Rev. Robert J. Bowers.

In two weeks, the pastor of St. Catherine of Siena will say a final Mass and begin a sabbatical that is as open-ended as it is undefined. He does not know if he will be a Roman Catholic priest when it is over.

"The last few years have put me in such a crisis," he said. "It is not a crisis of faith in God but of faith in an institution, in a leadership that does not know its own people. I need to get some space from all this to see my way clear to what's next."

"All this" is the painful fallout from the clergy sex abuse scandal and the parish closings that have made so many Catholics question the direction of the Archdiocese of Boston.

The questions are personal for the priest the poor and immigrant parishioners at St. Catherine's call "Father Bob."

He is paying a high price for expressing his disillusionment with an imperious hierarchy that covered up the rape of children and padlocked the people's churches without their consent.

The pressure he and his parishioners brought to bear forced Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley to abandon his plan to close St. Catherine's and preserve two wealthier, whiter parishes in Charlestown.

Instead, all three will form a single, as yet unnamed, parish.

The Rev. James J. Ronan will be the pastor.

O'Malley has said that Bowers's denunciations of church leadership had nothing to do with his removal. He has said the same about the Rev. Ron Coyne, the equally outspoken pastor of St. Albert the Great, the Weymouth church that has been occupied by parishioners for 10 weeks.

Coyne has yet to be reassigned, despite O'Malley's contention that closing St. Albert's and 81 other churches is necessary because of a shortage of priests.

O'Malley offered Father Bob a transfer to a West Roxbury parish with the warning that the priest had fences to mend and a long wait before he would be considered for a pastor's post again. Bowers fought for a sabbatical instead. "I have a lot of thinking to do," said the priest, who taught himself Spanish so he could celebrate Mass in the native language of so many of the residents of the Bunker Hill housing project who fill the pews at St. Catherine's.

No one finds the 43-year-old priest's predicament more bewildering than his mother, JeaneAnn Bowers.

"It is not just Bob. It is so many priests. They are battered, weary, a diminished thin line. Bob sacrificed himself in Charlestown to give the people of his parish a voice. Someday, someone is going to listen to these priests," she said. In a recent impassioned letter, she asked O'Malley to do just that.

For now, Father Bob is thinking only about the immediate future.

He plans an upbeat liturgy for his final Mass on the first Sunday of Advent, a time of hope and promise in Catholicism. He is preparing an exhibit with other artists with whom he shares studio space in a converted Charlestown factory. His art has kept him sane, he said.

Where he will live, what he will do for work is still an open question.

"He could do good outside of the church, but I know what it means to him to say the Mass. I know what it means to me to see him say Mass," said his mother. "I just hope he does not lose his vocation."

Time and prayer will tell, said Father Bob: "God has always led me where I am supposed to be. I know God is not done with me."