

7-28-08 - Rev. Bernard P. McLaughlin, 74; supported parishioners during clergy abuse scandal

By John C. Drake, Boston Globe Staff

The Rev. Bernard P. McLaughlin, who served airport travelers and the poor during a lengthy East Boston ministry and then became an outspoken critic of the Boston Archdiocese's handling of the clergy abuse scandal during an 11-year stint at St. Gerard Majella Church in Canton, died early yesterday in Lynn after a long illness. He was 74.

Parishioners at St. Gerard Majella, which he led until illness forced his retirement in 2006, credit Father McLaughlin with helping distressed Catholics deal with their anger against church hierarchy and keeping parish membership growing in the aftermath of the crisis, while other parishes faced dwindling attendance.

"He somehow was able to put himself on our side," said longtime parishioner and parish council member Ann Ackil. "He became very special to all the parishioners after that, because he weathered the storm with us."

Father McLaughlin was distressed by the abuse scandal and the Archdiocese of Boston's response to it, and was later shaken to learn that a former associate pastor at St. Gerard's was accused of abuse, associates and parishioners have said. He organized regular listening sessions, brought in theologians and psychologists to address church members, and called on Cardinal Bernard F. Law to resign. A self-described conservative turned moderate, Father McLaughlin also advocated for a stepped-up role for laity in church governance.

"He always had a great respect for the intelligence and creativity of the people in the pews," said Monsignor Paul V. Garrity, pastor of St. Mary's in Lynn and a longtime friend of Father McLaughlin's.

His service in Canton was but his last stop during a half-century of ministerial service.

The son of a Boston firefighter, Father McLaughlin attended Boston Latin School, graduated from St. John's Seminary in Brighton in 1959, and later became the youngest ever to teach there. In an interview for a 2002 Globe profile, Father McLaughlin called his decision to enter the priesthood "like diving into a mystery I didn't understand."

For 23 years, he was chaplain at Our Lady of the Airways Chapel at Logan Airport, conducting Mass for harried travelers and pilots and greeting arriving dignitaries. In that role, Father McLaughlin presided over an elaborate arrival ceremony for Law, when the cardinal first arrived as bishop of Boston in 1984. While serving the airport, he presided over Holy Redeemer in East Boston, from 1983 to 1995.

Embracing community activism, Father McLaughlin started a soup kitchen at the church and, in 1985, converted a former convent into Crossroads Family Shelter, which still operates in East Boston. He hosted a local radio talk show on religious issues from 1984 to 1995. Politicians noticed his airport duties and community work and appointed him to two high-profile positions. Mayor Raymond L. Flynn of Boston named him chairman of the city's Emergency Shelter Commission, and Governor Edward J. King named him to the State Ethics Commission, where he was vice chairman.

Father McLaughlin, who was looking to slow down, was named pastor of St. Gerard Majella Church in 1995, a move that would mark a significant departure from the urban ministry to which he had been accustomed. But parishioners quickly took to his pithy homilies and down-to-earth manner, friends said, even if some teased him for his "high-speed airport homilies." And he found lower-profile ways to help those in need.

"While people may think Canton is an upscale community, there's a real need," Garrity said yesterday by phone.

Father McLaughlin started the "Neighbors in Need" fund, which provided cash to Canton families enduring financial hardship.

"It was done in a very low-key, confidential, and discreet way," Ackil said. "People really gave to that fund because they trusted him."

When the clergy sexual abuse scandal escalated in 2002, Father McLaughlin addressed the vexing issues of pedophilia and betrayal head-on, sharing in members' anger through listening sessions, weekly columns, and support for lay action.

In one column, he wrote, "For a long time, the archdiocese has been concerned with appearances and not reality. . . . Secrecy has got to go."

"He was the glue that kept the parish together in an amazing way at that time," said parish council member John Hynes, who also is a leader of Voice of the Faithful, a laity church reform group that Father McLaughlin embraced. "He courageously spoke what he believed to be the truth irrespective of the consequences for himself personally as a member of the church leadership."

Father McLaughlin told the Globe in 2006 that he wanted to be remembered "as somebody who cared and loved. I make a big deal out of love. I believe that's why we're born."

Father McLaughlin's health deteriorated after a stroke two years ago, Garrity said. For several months, Father McLaughlin remained in the church's rectory, with parishioners guarding his health closely and bringing him dinner each night, until he was moved to an assisted living facility in Lynnfield. He died at the Life Care Center of the North Shore in Lynn yesterday, Garrity said. He leaves a brother, Francis X. of Kensington, Md.

Father McLaughlin will lie in state at St. Gerard Majella Church, 1860 Washington St., Canton, from 2 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, with a wake service following at 7 p.m. His funeral Mass will be held at 11 a.m. Friday in St. Gerard's with burial to follow at Mount Calvary in Roslindale