

With one voice

Thousands protest church in public Mass

By Michael Paulson,

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In an unusual public celebration of Mass by people protesting the leadership of the Catholic Church, about 2,000 people gathered on Boston Common yesterday to demonstrate through collective worship their unhappiness with the management of the Boston Archdiocese.

The two-hour, Voice of the Faithful-organized Mass, which was neither authorized nor condemned by archdiocesan officials, was meant, organizers said, to offer a show of strength by parishioners at some of the 82 parishes slated for closure this year by Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley.

Four priests who lead parishes targeted for closure officiated at the Mass, and along a walkway organizers had arrayed small white placards bearing the names of the closing parishes meant to evoke tombstones: St. Michael, Lynn; Mary Immaculate of Lourdes, Newton; Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Plymouth, and so on.

"This is a message of solidarity with the people and the parishes being closed, and is a demonstration of resolve that this church is going to change," said James E. Post, president of Voice of the Faithful, a lay group headquartered in Newton and established by Catholics unhappy over the clergy sexual-abuse crisis. "These are not radical people, but they've been radicalized."

The crowd, estimated by Voice of the Faithful executive director Steve Krueger to have reached 1,800 to 2,000 people, was made up heavily of middle-aged and elderly Catholics, who wore sweatshirts, windbreakers, and anoraks as the remnants of Hurricane Charley passed overhead. Many clutched signs supporting their parishes or affixed bumper stickers to their clothing, proclaiming slogans such as "Save Our St. Susanna's" and "Keep St. Albert's Open."

Louis DiBenedetto, 74, sat in a lawn chair holding a small photograph of a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the icon associated with his parish in East Boston, which is slated to close. DiBenedetto said he was baptized at the church and had hoped to be buried from there.

"Archbishop O'Malley tells us he is a Franciscan, but St. Francis didn't close churches, he built them," said DiBenedetto, tears forming in his eyes.

DiBenedetto said he had never been active in Voice of the Faithful but decided to come to yesterday's Mass "because I think they're right."

Worshippers said they had come to the Mass in the hope that their prayers or their presence would cause O'Malley to reverse course.

"We need a miracle in the next two weeks," said Susan Donnelly of Weymouth, a parishioner at St. Albert the Great Church, which is scheduled to close Sept. 1. "There's always hope. That's all we can say."

Anne Green, 53, of Holliston, a parishioner at Sacred Heart Church in South Natick, said she can't understand why her parish is targeted. "We have a small parish, but it's self-sustaining, and we just don't see the necessity for its closing."

"It's not too late for them to reconsider," Green said.

Archdiocesan spokesman the Rev. Christopher J. Coyne declined to comment last night.

Many worshippers appeared angry at the archdiocese.

"They're not only closing churches, they're closing families, because our church is a family," said Michele Cannizzaro, 36, of Charlestown, a parishioner at St. Catherine of Siena Church, also slated to close.

Maureen Bannon, 64, a parishioner at St. Anselm Church in Sudbury, said, "Our hierarchy tells us we are the church, so we want them to hear our voice. No more will we be silent. What they're doing is wrong, especially to parishes like St. Anselm's that are strong, vibrant, and financially independent. We weren't asking them for anything, we were just giving, giving, giving. But will we be heard?"

The Mass, on ground where Pope John Paul II had celebrated Mass in 1979, was led by the Rev. Stephen S. Josoma of St. Susanna in Dedham (presiding), the Rev. Robert J. Bowers of St. Catherine of Siena in Charlestown (homilist), the Rev. Ronald Coyne of St. Albert the Great in Weymouth, and the Rev. David Gill of St. Mary of the Angels in Roxbury (concelebrates). The priests, under a blue canopy on a temporary stage decorated with sunflowers, were direct in their criticism of church leadership. Josoma asked forgiveness "for the times we have paid, prayed, and obeyed."

Bowers said, "the leadership of the archdiocese has confused the mission of the church with the money of the church," and then said that while O'Malley says the closings reflect a shortage of priests and low Mass attendance, "what we don't have are bishops who have the courage to ask why."

Some bishops have welcomed Voice of the Faithful while others have banned it; in Boston, the archdiocese has allowed affiliates formed before October 2002 to meet in parishes, but has not allowed affiliates established more recently to do so.

Voice of the Faithful, which says it has 35,000 members nationwide, says its mission is to provide a voice for laity to "participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church" and its goals are to support victims of abuse and "priests of integrity," and to "shape structural change" in the church.

Bowers said he saw the crowd yesterday as evidence of possibility for the church in Boston, saying "new birth is being cradled right here in the Boston Common."

Just before the Mass, a woman whose experience helped trigger the clergy sexual-abuse crisis spoke to the crowd.

Maryetta Dussourd, whose three sons and four of their cousins said they were molested by the Rev. John J. Geoghan in the 1970s, told the crowd, "today is a day that God is mobilizing all of us as a family."

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