

## Capuchin Bishop to Boston

1 August 2003

### Bishop Sean O'Malley OFM Cap named Archbishop of Boston



Our brother **Sean O'Malley OFM Cap**, Bishop of Palm Beach, FL, was officially named by our Holy Father, John Paul II, as the Archbishop of Boston this week. Bishop Sean will be installed as the ninth archbishop of Boston on July 30, the archdiocese announced Wednesday. It is scheduled to take place at 11 a.m. at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Boston,

*An article from: "The National Catholic Reporter" by Joe Feuerherd*

Boston Archbishop-elect Sean O'Malley need not look beyond the tradition of his Capuchin Franciscan religious order for a job description: "Go rebuild my church which, as you can see, is falling to ruin."

Francis of Assisi, it is said, received that mandate from the crucifix above him as he prayed in the Chapel of San Damiano early in the 13th century.

Nearly 800 years later, O'Malley's task appears no less daunting than that of Francis himself.

He inherits a 2 million-member archdiocese fairly described as approaching ruin: Mass attendance at record lows, lay activists clamouring for a greater role in church affairs, contributions plummeting, a clergy unafraid to publicly question its leaders, and, not least, more than 500 pending sexual abuse claims against the archdiocese.

Since the December 2002 resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, Boston Catholics viewed the selection of a new archbishop as a critical moment in the crisis facing their church. Still, in the six months leading up to O'Malley's selection, there was more fear than hope concerning the impending appointment. Few -- liberals or conservatives, traditionalists or modernizers -- believed the Vatican would, or could, name an archbishop in whom Bostonians could place their trust.

And then, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, came the O'Malley appointment. The appointment was a surprise - but by nearly all indications a welcome one.

Known for his capable handling of sex abuse scandals when he served as bishop of neighbouring Fall River, Mass., from 1992-2002, O'Malley had instant credibility.

"It appears that they perceived the big need here to be someone who could come in and heal the situation and settle the cases -- someone who has a track record that people could have confidence in, and it sure looks like he has that," said Kennedy School of Government professor Mary Jo Bane, a frequent critic of the Boston hierarchy in the 19 months since the scandals became unrelenting front-page news.

O'Malley's commitment to Capuchin Franciscan ideals (the Capuchins were founded as a reform movement within the Franciscan Order in 1528) was well received in an archdiocese accustomed to imperious leadership.

As bishop of Palm Beach, O'Malley declined to move into the bishop's residence, living instead in a modest house in Palm Beach Gardens. Would the new archbishop, the media inquired at a July 1 news conference, live in the cardinal's Commonwealth Avenue mansion?

O'Malley's reluctance to be associated with the archdiocese's most visible symbol of hierarchical remoteness was unmistakable. "Obviously, as a Franciscan brother, I prefer to have the simplest quarters." O'Malley's garb -- he favours the traditional brown Capuchin habit and sandals -- provided yet another indication that the city was getting a different kind of archbishop.

"O'Malley is a true Capuchin, a man of evangelical fervour, simplicity and deep prayer," said Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan, in an interview with NCR during a recent visit to Rome.

"To the degree that those who are eager to denigrate the church find it useful to depict prelates as spoiled princes living off the fat of the land ... then obviously there's nothing more 'in your face' than the whole Capuchin tradition," Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, told NCR.

One discordant note was sounded by some abuse victims (including those who say O'Malley's record in Fall River was less than stellar), though even that aggrieved community appears prepared to give O'Malley a chance. "Given the short list, I'm optimistic about this choice," said Bill Gately, New England co-coordinator for Survivors of those Abused by Priests, SNAP.

In Washington, D.C., where O'Malley attended the Capuchin College in the mid-1960s, the Lakewood, Ohio, native is recalled both for his humility and his activism. Following his 1970 ordination, the polylingual O'Malley received a master's degree in religious education and doctorates in Spanish and Portuguese literature from Catholic University, where he also taught.

"Washington Catholics who were close to the young priest recall his activism, yes, but the word that first comes to mind when they are asked about O'Malley is "humble."

"The most significant thing about him is that he is a very humble person, a person that is dedicated to service to the people," says Dominguez.

This humility and commitment to service comes directly from the Franciscan tradition, says his fellow Capuchin, Fr. Donald Lippert. "He has a horizontal approach to people, he's compassionate and approachable and he's able to speak with people in a very unassuming way," said Lippert.

O'Malley's commitment to social services and advocacy were evident in both the Virgin Islands, where he was appointed coadjutor to the St. Thomas diocese in 1984 and then bishop in 1985, and Fall River, where he served from 1992-2002.

In Fall River, recalled Congressman Barney Frank, D-Mass., O'Malley opposed restrictions on government benefits to legal immigrants and aggressive deportation procedures. O'Malley, Frank told NCR in a phone interview, did more than denounce the policies, "he put the resources of the diocese behind the effort" through establishment of legal clinics and other support services.

But O'Malley was not brought to Fall River primarily to advocate for that community's large immigrant community. Instead, it was his task to reform a diocese racked by allegations of clerical sexual abuse and cover-up. Within six months of assuming office, O'Malley agreed to a settlement with nearly 70 victims of former priest James Porter and instituted perhaps the toughest child protection policies of any diocese to that point.

Bishop O'Malley views legal abortion as a grave evil.

Writing in *The Anchor*, Fall River's diocesan paper, prior to the 2002 midterm elections, O'Malley said: "I will not vote for any politician who will promote abortion or the culture of death, no matter how appealing the rest of his or her program might be. They are wolves in sheep's garments, the KKK without the sheets, and sadly enough, they don't even know it."

His reputation as an abuse-scandal fixer solidified, O'Malley was tapped by the Vatican last year to head the embattled Palm Beach, Fla., diocese, where his two immediate predecessors acknowledged their personal involvement in sexual abuse and where financial scandals had shaken the confidence of contributors.

Edward Ricci, a prominent local attorney and supporter of Catholic causes had been publicly critical of the diocese's financial management. Ricci's impressions of Bishop O'Malley are: "The sense I have is that his administrative talents are not his strong suit. The man succeeds by strength of personal character. It's very hard to have a conversation and not have the sense that you're dealing with a very good, holy man."

That's just what the church needs more of, says Neuhaus. The O'Malley appointment is a "move away from a dominantly managerial model of the Episcopal office, which I think is exactly the right move."