

St. Anselm Parish

100 Landham Road
Sudbury, MA 01776

A Caring, Committed, Catholic Community

October 4, 2004

Why We Are Here

The St. Anselm Parish Council discusses the Reasons for their Vigil

Dear friends,

From time to time, folks ask our parishioners why we are holding our vigil. We are writing this letter to try and answer that question.

Perhaps we should begin by saying who we are and who we are not. The motto for our little parish is, “a Caring, Committed, Catholic Community,” and we take the Catholic part of that very seriously. We are not a group of left wing Catholics seeking to overturn the teachings of the church or the authority of the bishops. For most of us, it would have been hard to imagine just one year ago that we would be here today. We are main stream Catholics, young and old, liberal and conservative, just an ordinary Catholic parish with a somewhat unusual history.

Our History

The early years

Our parish was formed in 1963 as families from three parishes in North Framingham and South Sudbury were asked to start fresh and build a new community and a new church. The parish was established with a relatively small geography and population base. Despite its small size, the early members of the parish rose to the challenge and built a wonderful, faith filled community. Volunteers ran all sorts of fund raisers to cover expenses and pay off the large mortgage. At the same time, they built a true sense of family in the parish and a culture of service to the community.

The last decade

By the early 1990's, the community recognized the challenge of the decline in vocations for the Archdiocese. We realized that we were too small to expect a full time resident pastor for much longer. With the inspiration of our pastor, we started planning for the future. We established commissions of lay people to handle a wide variety of parochial functions. Our lay leadership participated in training opportunities offered by the Archdiocese so that they would be well formed to handle many of the day-to-day operations of the parish. We expanded our stewardship efforts to increase contributions of time, talent and treasure. We took to heart the teachings of Vatican II on the role of the laity and the mission of all of the Baptized.

In the late 1990's when the Archdiocese first addressed reconfiguration, we joined in the efforts. Our Parish Pastoral and Finance Council members participated in all of the meetings called for by Cardinal Law. We worked extensively with the Metro West Collaborative of parishes on joint programs. But the Archdiocesan efforts for reconfiguration in the West Region were disjointed. At different times we were told to cluster with different groups of parishes, which made effective planning with them impossible.

In 1999, we had our periodic Visitation with the regional Bishop. As part of the Visitation process, a Pastoral Plan is required to be submitted to the Archdiocese. Our Pastoral Plan acknowledged the problem of the shortage of priests and laid out an effective vision of how our parish would operate with a part-time pastor and an increased staff of lay personnel designed to meet the needs of the parish, including a full time, accredited Pastoral Associate. This plan was accepted without exception by Cardinal Law.

At the end of 1999, as our pastor was approaching retirement, there was a meeting between representatives of the parish and our regional Bishop. Once again, the pastoral plan was reviewed in detail. And in the spring of 2000, the parish hired a full time Pastoral Associate and was assigned a part time pastor.

St. Anselm's Structure with a Part-Time Priest

All of this required enormous investment on the part of parishioners. The entire parish was reorganized in order to reduce the time commitment from our priest. In many parishes, the priest, in addition to being the spiritual and sacramental leader of the parish, must also deal with day-to-day financial, administrative and facilities issues. At St. Anselm, we had reorganized ourselves and invested heavily of our time and material resources so that our priest could focus his attention on the things that a true pastor must. The rest of it, we took care of ourselves, always subject to the pastor's ultimate authority. It was a lot of work, but the rewards were incredible. We had built a very active parish with many young families.

By reconfiguring our parish in this way, we thought we were truly responding to the Archdiocesan issue of the shortage of priests. We were not blind to the issue or resistant to change. We called on the creative energies of God's People to address a very real issue. We thought we had created a structure that would be useful for other parishes. In fact, others did come to visit us to see how we were making it work.

The Deaf Community Center

In this process, the parish did not become insular or self absorbed. In 2002, our pastor advised us of a new problem. In addition to his assignment as administrator of St. Anselm, he ran the Deaf Community Center (DCC) located in South Framingham. For over 30 years, DCC had provided a wide range of pastoral and social services to the deaf of the Archdiocese of Boston. Due to funding constraints at Catholic Charities, DCC was told that it would lose its facilities. St. Anselm parish immediately responded by inviting DCC to relocate to our parish. Over the course of the ensuing months, all of the DCC programs moved into our facilities and the deaf became active and welcome members of our community.

The Clerical Abuse Crisis

The parish also responded to the clerical abuse crisis. Knowing that Sudbury had been home to one of the most widely publicized cases of sexual abuse, we reached out to the survivors. As difficult as it was, we invited those who had been abused to come and speak to us in an effort to promote healing both for our church and the survivors. We also raised funds and did what we could to support their efforts at healing and reconciliation. The parish also reached out to the good priests who were so wounded by the actions of others, finding ways to support them in any way we could.

Reconfiguration 2004

As the clouds of reconfiguration gathered in late 2003, we once again joined in the discussions. We understood that serious issues face the Archdiocese of Boston and that we must address them together as Church. As those of you who participated in the process know, it was confusing and difficult at best. Although we were not assigned to any “cluster” of parishes, we were told that we were to meet with the one other parish in Sudbury and answer the question, ““If the Archbishop needs to close a parish in your cluster for the greater good of the Archdiocese, how would you recommend that your cluster of parishes be reconfigured and why?”” Needless to say, this required two parishes to choose one of them to be closed. When we first met, there was no doubt that the other parish and its Pastor (who is also the regional Vicar) had already decided the answer to that question. The meetings were difficult, but the St. Anselm representative tried to find a way that we could be responsive and helpful to the reconfiguration process. In the end, the cluster submitted two reports. The other parish acknowledged that St. Anselm was a strong and vibrant community but recommended that St. Anselm be closed anyway. The process paid little attention to the fact that half of St. Anselm’s parishioners live in Framingham and ignored completely the important work being done with the deaf at St. Anselm. The St Anselm report concluded that both parishes were healthy communities and that we had no basis for choosing between them.

During the weeks and months that followed, we heard nothing from the Archdiocese. Despite being given assurances that we would see the reports submitted by the Vicar and the Regional Bishop, nothing was provided. The parish, however, continued to try and help with reconfiguration.

As part of the reconfiguration efforts, the Archdiocese asked for a new pastoral plan for deaf ministry. Having already incorporated a major segment of the ministry to the deaf into parish life, we assisted those ministering to the deaf in developing that plan. A key feature of the plan was to centralize all of the deaf ministry in a single location. Stepping forward once again, the parish asked to provide that central location, an idea that was strongly supported in the deaf community.

The Archbishop’s Decision

Despite all of these efforts for over a decade, on May 25, 2004 we received a one page letter from Archbishop Sean telling us that he had decided that St. Anselm parish would close. The letter contained no explanation of the decision and none would ever be forthcoming.

Dozens and dozens of letters have been written to Archbishop Sean begging for an explanation and asking him or a representative to come and speak to our community. Only one letter was ever responded to. One parishioner wrote to say that she was rewriting her will. Although she had intended to bequeath a significant part of her estate to the Archdiocese, she no longer felt that she could. She was invited to see Bishop Lennon, who offered no further explanation, but simply encouraged her to keep her bequest in tact.

Many of our parishioners began to try and work with the “welcoming” parishes. Since our parish crossed town lines and incorporated deaf folks from all over the Archdiocese, this process involved the splitting of this close knit community in several parts. Despite the obvious obstacles and the pain of trying to reconcile with the other parish in Sudbury, significant progress was made over the course of the summer. Our Pastor was working to relocate the deaf ministry to a nearby parish in Framingham and to be assigned there to be with his people. The response of the Archdiocese was disappointing to say the least. They decided to relocate all of the deaf ministry and all of the deaf who had become part of our community to a parish in Newton. Our Pastor was effectively excluded from the decision making process. After all of this, he contacted Archbishop Sean to discuss retirement.

The decision to hold a vigil at St. Anselm was made four days before the scheduled final Mass.

Why?

In many respects, the decision to hold the vigil was a spontaneous reaction of the community to the situation in which we found ourselves. Good, faithful Catholics were reacting to behavior on the part of the Archdiocese that they could not reconcile with their understanding of the faith. To some extent, we are still sorting through the reasons for our actions, but would like to share with you some of our thoughts and feelings.

Perhaps the most pressing question we face is, why? Why did Archbishop Sean decide that St. Anselm must close? We have never been given any answer other than the very general references to demographic shifts in population, a decline in the number of priests, financial challenges and the deteriorating condition of Archdiocesan properties. But how does that relate to us? The parish is located in an area with a growing population base, we have reconfigured the parish to require no more priestly resources on a per capita basis than others, we are financially sound (with over \$500,000 on deposit) and our buildings are in fine condition (in fact, \$150,000 was spent in the last 18 months to build classrooms and renovate the parish hall). If a parish is asked to sacrifice so much, don't they at least deserve an explanation?

But perhaps the more fundamental question is why the Archdiocese did not involve the wonderful and talented laity in the decision making process. Although Archbishop Sean has said that the laity were involved, their involvement began after Archbishop Sean made the most important decision himself. He makes this clear in his letter rejecting appeal. He alone decided that the only way to address the major issues faced by the church in Boston was to close a large number of parishes, including healthy, vibrant communities. To the extent there was lay involvement, it was only in deciding which parishes to close.

Through our experience of parish, we have come to see the wonderful ways in which the laity can and will respond to challenges. The intelligence, creativity and energy of our people are vast. There is no problem that they will not dive into and tackle. They are not blind to the severity of the issues faced by the church and they will make the sacrifices and endure the pain necessary to resolve them. They long to go forward arm in arm with their Bishops to confront and deal with all of the issues. Will the Bishops allow them to help in the ways envisioned by the teachings of the church?

The parishioners of St. Anselm make no challenge to the authority of our Bishop. But we feel very deeply that authority in the church in Boston has not been exercised well. It has not given the laity the voice, respect and responsibility called for by Vatican II and Canon Law. We respectfully ask our Archbishop to hear us, help us to understand the issues faced by our church and allow us to be part of solving them. Together, we could do great things in spreading the Gospel and rebuilding Christ's church. Our vision is one of hope and joint responsibility, not one of despair and conflict.

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We thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We ask you to join us in praying for Archbishop Sean and all the Bishops as they continue to sort out the effects of reconfiguration. We also invite you to pray for us and join us in helping to build a stronger, more loving and more faithful church in Boston.

Yours in Christ,
St. Anselm's Parish Council

PS Many of the documents referred to in this letter may be found on our web site at www.stanselmsudbury.org.