

## Archbishop Asks Forgiveness at St. Joe's

By Debra Filcman  
Needham Times  
June 1, 2006

<http://www2.townonline.com/needham/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=506065>

A standing ovation echoed between the brick walls of St. Joseph's Church Tuesday night, as Isabelle McIntyre stepped down from the podium. Just moments prior, she stood before pews full of fellow Catholics, and told of her family's plight, decades long and counting.

"He was our friend, our confidante, our parish priest," she said of the defrocked Paul Mahan, who worked at St. Ann's in Dorchester before coming to St. Joseph's in 1979.

McIntyre's voice cracked as she shared her story, with Cardinal Sean O'Malley sitting close, the only clear show of emotion all evening. The tale is a familiar one in the greater Boston area, where in 2002, knowledge of clergy's sexual abuse of children became public.

O'Malley, installed in 2003 following the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law in the wake of the scandal, visited St. Joseph's that night as part of his novena to the Holy Spirit, or nine-day "pilgrimage of repentance and hope." The series of prayer services, to be performed in Stoneham, Middleton, Brockton, Lowell, Needham, Weston, Hingham, Bellingham and Brighton, acknowledges the church's wrongdoing, O'Malley said, and seeks forgiveness from the community.

When he visited St. Joseph's Church, he was greeted by a predominantly white-haired crowd, with little fanfare, save a handful of protesters outside from Voice of the Faithful and Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

Most entered the church quietly, many with smiles, greeting old friends and catching up before the service began, but not all encounters were pleasant.

"Why don't you join us inside?" one woman suggested, forcefully, when a protester attempted to hand her a flier and chided her for entering the church.

The fliers asked residents to contact O'Malley, supporting legislation that would repeal the criminal and civil statute of limitations on sexual abuse. They also sought support for a published list of priests for whom a settlement has been paid.

Despite public apologies for both the molestation and the church's subsequent reaction, the focus Tuesday night was not on blame. Acknowledgement was at the forefront, as O'Malley prayed with and for the victims, and listened to the atrocities they endured.

This was new to McIntyre, who was told by priests, she said, that the reason people don't publicly pray for survivors is that it makes people "uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable is seeing my 27-year-old son, with his new bride, sit at my kitchen table and cry like a baby," McIntyre said. "It is uncomfortable to hear the click of a locked door of a psychiatric ward," after admitting my daughter.

Mahan's actions, and those of the Archdiocese of Boston, "stole the innocence of my children and almost destroyed my faith," she said.

Although she hasn't quite forgiven them, she's reached a point, she said, where she prays for the perpetrators of these crimes.

Likening her family's experience to the recent flooding throughout the state, she said, "We feel the devastation, we live with the destruction, and hopefully, we'll be a part of the restoration."

More than a dozen local priests were called down to the altar, before O'Malley began his prayers. Together, priests and parishioners alike sang, begging forgiveness of God for the covenants broken by molesting priests.

"Have mercy on us. Forgive us for the sins of your bishops, forgive us for the sins of your priests, forgive us for the sins of those called to serve your people..."

"It is important to hear these uncomfortable things, as you called it, because it will bring us to the truth," O'Malley said, before taking to the aisles of the church.

Preceded by the McIntyres, O'Malley, fellow priests and wide-eyed altar boys, poised in prayer position, walked to the back of the church, quickly returning to offer a flame to light the parishioners' Easter candles. Graciously, attendees craned around to find fellow parishioners in need of a light; others offered their candles up to those without one, and shared with their friends and family.

"The priest is supposed to be the icon of the good shepherd," O'Malley said, noting the situation was made worse by the church's failure to acknowledge the misdeeds. "We've attempted to remedy our egregious failures in many ways. Our novena is an opportunity to unite our community, and again, ask forgiveness of the survivors and their families."

O'Malley wandered the aisles once again, performing a sprinkling rite, in which he blesses the walls of the church water in a cleansing ritual.

To some, the words and gestures helped the healing process. "The building needed a cleansing," said the family member of a victim, a tearful Patty Noonan. Noonan, now a Dover resident, attended St. Joseph's for two decades. "I think it's a really good start."

"Anything that takes the focus off of people and on God is a good thing," Noonan added.

But to others, it was simply a matter of too little, too late.

Outside the church, following the service, petitioners still stood in the recently darkened streets. Several Voice of the Faithful members carried posters that bore the likenesses of victims, whose first names and ages were identified.

"Sometimes I like to hold the photos of children I don't know," Newton resident Bonnie Ciambotti said of 12-year-old Jim. "That way I know someone is advocating for them."

O'Malley, too, acknowledged that the pain of abuse, for both the victim and their family, never leaves.

"We will forever be sorry for the horror you experienced," he said.

The novena began on Ascension Thursday, May 25, when Jesus ascended into heaven, according to the Catholic religion. It ends on June 4, the Pentecost, which concludes the 50-day Easter season.