News



Then-Auxiliary Bishop Richard Henning of Rockville Centre, New York, speaks during Mass at St. Agnes Cathedral Jan. 1, 2021, in Rockville Centre, New York. On Aug. 5, the apostolic nunciature in Washington announced that Pope Francis had accepted Cardinal Sean O'Malley's resignation and appointed Henning to be Boston's 10th bishop and seventh archbishop. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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When he was told this past weekend that Cardinal Christophe Pierre was on the phone, Bishop Richard Henning of Providence, Rhode Island, did not expect the Vatican's ambassador to the United States to tell him he would be Boston's next archbishop.

"I was deeply shocked and surprised by this call," Henning said during an Aug. 5 press conference in Boston, where he sat next to the man he will succeed, Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

On Aug. 5, the apostolic nunciature in Washington, D.C., announced that Pope Francis had accepted O'Malley's resignation and appointed Henning to be Boston's 10th bishop and seventh archbishop.

Henning said he had to sit down after Pierre broke the news to him, and that it took him three minutes before he could respond. Installed a little more than a year ago in Providence, Henning said his first thoughts were for "the people in Rhode Island."

"That was the hardest part of it for me," said Henning.

O'Malley, a Capuchin Franciscan friar who became Boston's archbishop in July 2003 when the archdiocese was still reeling from the clergy sex abuse scandals revealed by the Boston Globe in 2002, turned 80 on June 29.

Henning will be installed as Boston's archbishop on Oct. 31, the eve of the upcoming jubilee year. O'Malley will continue to serve as Boston's archbishop until then.

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The episcopal transition in Boston marks a momentous moment for the U.S. Catholic church. O'Malley, who was seen as an early voice in the hierarchy who recognized the gravity of the clergy abuse crisis, has gained national and global attention,

especially during Francis' pontificate.

O'Malley has been a member of the pope's Council of Cardinals, also known as the C-9, since it was formed in 2013 to advise the pope on matters of church governance. He has also served as president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors since that entity's creation in 2014.

He told reporters that he will probably divide his time between Boston and Washington, where he founded an organization in the early 1970s that assists Hispanic immigrants, adding that Francis has also asked him to continue serving in his role as president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

"I don't think I'll be bored. I'm not going to take up golf," O'Malley said. "But I will try to stay out of the new archbishop's way and to be available to him if he needs anything."

Several leading bishops responded to the news of O'Malley's upcoming departure from Boston. New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan issued a statement expressing gratitude for O'Malley as "he begins his well-earned retirement."

"For decades he has been a leader for the Church in the United States, and I know that we can look forward to his continued presence with us, as he continues his loving service to Jesus and His Church," Dolan said.

Writing on X, the social media platform previously known as Twitter, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory commended O'Malley for his "incredible pastoral service to our Church in many locations."

He also said he is "certain that Archbishop Richard Henning will build upon the solid pastoral foundation that he inherits today."

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> — Cardinal Sean O'Malley
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Speaking with reporters Aug. 5 in the archdiocese's headquarters in Braintree, Massachusetts, O'Malley said he had not given much thought to his legacy, though he did reflect on the challenges that he faced upon arriving in Boston in 2003.

"My 20 years in Boston have been challenging and wonderful years in many respects," O'Malley said. "But when I arrived it was a time of great crisis and great pain because of the terrible scourge of sexual abuse. But despite all of the challenges we have faced, I am filled with hope as I see people who have come forward to be a part of the mission of the church, and have stayed with the church through very, very difficult times."

Though O'Malley struck a hopeful note, he at times received criticism from victim abuse survivors and advocates who saw him as not doing enough to root out the clericalist culture that they said exacerbated the coverup of sex abuse.

Mike McDonnell, communications director for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, told National Catholic Reporter that "just because a new bishop [is installed], that doesn't mean any child or adult is safer from harm by those employed by those who minister."

"We can't forget the past or present," McDonnell said. "We especially can never forget victims who have yet to step forward."

Adding that the arrival of a new bishop is "always a time of renewal and hope" for the church, O'Malley said that Henning brings "the heart of a pastor" to his new role in Boston.

Ordained a priest in 1992 for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, and consecrated an auxiliary bishop for that diocese in July 2018, Henning struck a pastoral note during his introductory press conference. He referred to himself as primarily "a sinner in need of grace."

"I think my first job really is to be a listener, and begin to understand," Henning said of what his first priority will be in Boston. Later asked about his thoughts on how he sees the role of bishop in political controversies, Henning stressed that he does not see himself as an activist.

"I'm not that exciting," he said. "My stance in Providence has been that I am a pastor, not a politician."

Describing politics as the proper arena for the laity, Henning said he sees his role as helping to form consciences while not commenting on political candidates or telling Catholics who they should support. He added that he would keep his voting preferences to himself.

"That's not my job, to advocate for either side," said Henning, who added that he is pro-life. He acknowledged that "there are people of goodwill who disagree with that," but said he believes "there's room for us to talk to one another."

Regarding the clergy sex abuse crisis, Henning said his message to survivors is that he will always "listen to their pain and their woundedness."

"Those survivors," Henning said, "they deserve a listening heart. In some ways, they have as much to proclaim about the Gospel as we do to them."

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