News



Archbishop Richard Henning displays the papal bull on his appointment to head the Archdiocese of Boston from Pope Francis during his installation Mass at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Oct. 31 in Boston. (OSV News/The Pilot/Gregory L. Tracy)



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Standing in the middle of the sanctuary at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, speaking for 20 minutes without notes or a prepared text, Archbishop Richard Henning presented himself as a modest fellow believer to his new flock in Boston.

"The most important thing that you, the people of this archdiocese need to know about me, is that I believe," Henning said during his Mass of installation Oct. 31.

Besides joking that he has often been asked if he's going to become a fan of the Boston Red Sox, Henning focused his homily on spiritual themes related to God's mercy, forgiveness and desire to be in relationship with humanity.

"This God longs to redeem us, to save us from sin, from death, from ourselves," Henning said. "God is faithful, does not give up on us. God follows after us, seeks us out and this God longs to be in a relationship with us. I believe that God desires us to be a part of a partnership."

Hundreds of people packed the cathedral in Boston's South End to witness the elaborate liturgy where Henning was installed as the 10th bishop of Boston, succeeding Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who had served as archbishop there since 2003.



Archbishop Richard Henning speaks with demonstrators outside Boston's Cathedral of the Holy Cross before his installation Mass as archbishop of Boston, on Oct. 31. (OSV News/The Pilot/Gregory L. Tracy)

Dozens more sang hymns outside the cathedral while a small group of clergy sex abuse survivors held signs and protested on the sidewalk. Robert Hoatson, a clergy sex abuse survivor and reform advocate, said he did not expect "much to change at all" in the new church leadership in Boston.

"The bishops all play from the same playbook and that is to protect the assets and protect the image of the church," Hoatson told National Catholic Reporter.

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, gained national and global renown for his leadership and personal humility.

A Capuchin Franciscan friar who eschewed the archbishop's palatial residence for the cathedral's inner-city rectory, O'Malley 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.



Cardinal Sean O'Malley opens the door of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross to greet Archbishop Richard Henning at the start of the Mass to install Henning as archbishop of Boston, on Oct. 31. (OSV News/The Pilot/Gregory L. Tracy)

With O'Malley, who turned 80 on June 29, accompanied in the cathedral sanctuary by dozens of other bishops from across the country, Henning in his homily acknowledged the painful history and legacy of the sex abuse crisis in Boston.

"This church of Boston, it is in a very real sense, a wounded church, because of the failure to act with compassion and healing," said Henning, who spoke of "sins against the innocent" and the efforts over the decades since to protect the vulnerable.

"But still we feel the weight of those wounds," Henning said, adding that the church owes "a debt of gratitude" to the scores of victim-survivors who have told their stories.

Said Henning, "For they have helped to protect new generations by their courage and by their prophetic truth-telling to us, and in their living of the faith, in their capacity for compassion and solidarity, of love of neighbor, they become for us hope in the midst of the world, a light in the darkness."

Ordained a priest in 1992 for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, Henning was consecrated an auxiliary bishop for that diocese in July 2018. In November 2022, Henning was appointed a coadjutor bishop for the Diocese of Providence in Rhode Island. He succeeded Bishop Thomas Tobin as the bishop in Providence on May 1, 2023.



Archbishop Richard Henning delivers remarks before the final blessing of his installation Mass as archbishop of Boston at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Oct. 31 in Boston. (OSV News/The Pilot/Gregory L. Tracy)

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

In addition to being credited for steering the archdiocese through the fallout of the clergy abuse crisis and stabilizing its finances, O'Malley's ecclesial profile grew 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.

O'Malley has also served as president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors since that entity's creation in 2014. On Oct. 29, the commission released its first annual report that assessed measures taken to prevent sexual violence and abuse within the church. Speaking at a Vatican press conference, O'Malley said he hoped the report would help ensure the church's "firm commitment" against sexual abuse.

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Though O'Malley struck a hopeful note, he at times also received criticism from victim abuse survivors and advocates who saw him as not doing enough to address the sex abuse crisis. Many survivors and advocates say that the hierarchy aren't rooting out the clericalist culture that they say exacerbates the cover-up of sex abuse. Holding a sign outside the cathedral on Oct. 31, Melanie Perkins McLaughlin, a documentary filmmaker, said there needs to be more transparency among the hierarchy.

"I don't think there has been as much transparency as there should be," McLaughlin said. "Maybe it's time for change. Maybe it's time to bring people back into their spiritual faith through change and honesty and all the things that God has clearly wanted us to do all along, in terms of the faithful and being more forthcoming."

Speaking Oct. 31 at the cathedral in Boston, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, thanked O'Malley "for all the ways you have been close to God's people." O'Malley received a standing ovation from the congregation.



Cardinal Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago and Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, join the assembly in giving Cardinal Sean O'Malley a standing ovation during the installation Mass of his successor, Archbishop Richard Henning, at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Oct. 31 in Boston. (OSV News/The Pilot/Gregory L. Tracy)

And referencing Francis' call for bishops to be close to God and their people, Pierre thanked Henning for his "pledge to continue" that closeness in his episcopal ministry.

Said Pierre, "I am confident your experiences as a pastor and leader will help you in your mission here, but even more fundamentally, what will guide you is what you have come to know from your own encounter with God. It is there, in this personal encounter, that you are able to receive the Lord's love, kindness, understanding and mercy. This is the God you will reveal to those whom you serve here."

Henning said he knows there will be challenges being the shepherd of one of the country's leading archdioceses.

"I know at the start of my journey here, with you, that there will be many difficult things to come," he said. "There will be many challenges. I'm sure there'll be days when you'll have a hard time and I'll be exhausted. But I know this, believe this, that whatever happens on any day, whatever comes, Jesus is still Lord."

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