

Poor, tired, ignored, the Lawrence faithful give the church hope

It was a full house, about 1,000 people, at 9 o'clock Mass on Palm Sunday at St. Patrick's in Lawrence and the crowd — young and old, citizens from birth alongside recent arrivals, Anglos shaking hands with Hispanics who turned to greet Vietnamese in a sign of peace — was visible proof that faith is strongest at the bottom, where a need for spiritual support takes precedence over sex scandals.

The old church was built in 1881, right on South Broadway, and stands today across the street from Carey's Flowers, a Vietnamese restaurant, a Cambodian market and the Hart-Wallace funeral home.

"This is the place," the Rev. Paul O'Brien, the pastor, said. "This is the real church, the real faith."

O'Brien is a 39-year-old graduate of Boston Latin and Harvard and just about the last guy any of his friends would have figured for the priesthood. He has a deep curiosity about the human condition, a healthy level of outrage toward inequity and a sense of humor that allows him to keep pace with his college roommate, Conan O'Brien.

"I didn't tell my family what I was going to do until Thanksgiving my senior year," Paul O'Brien said. "And when I said I was going to become a priest, my brothers asked, 'What religion?' I wasn't exactly Catholic of the Year back then."

He stood at the back of the church Sunday, talking about the parish and the town, when a young guy wanted to know if O'Brien would hear his confession.

"Sure," the priest told him. "Come over here."

They sat in a pew at the back of the church. The priest, nodding, listening; the young guy, talking softly, making the sign of the cross as

Paul O'Brien blessed him.

"Ex-member of the Latin Gangstas," the priest said. "No small thing here to be an ex-gang member and stay in the community."

Outside the church, a deranged homeless man about 35 years old, wearing a UMass jacket, pushed an empty grocery cart down the middle of the road while shouting at the sky. His name is Bobby and two years ago Paul O'Brien baptized him.

"When I announced it at Mass everyone stood and applauded," the priest remembered. "A lot of the homeless live here."

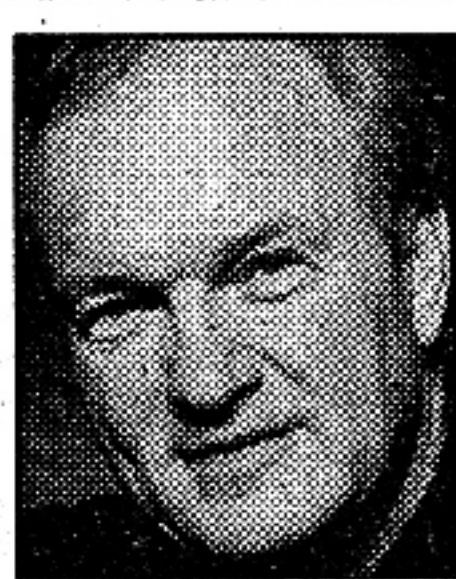
The archdiocese just announced collections are off and so some services aimed at feeding

the hungry and clothing the poor will probably be cut. Lawrence and St. Patrick's represent a numbers game of those who don't count because they are poor and live without political clout. Their issues are not gay marriage, war or a constitutional amendment. They are too busy looking for food, work and a place to live. Little things like that.

"Out of 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts," Paul O'Brien said, "Lawrence ranks 350th in poverty. The average per capita income is about \$13,000 dollars, half the state average; 21 percent live below the poverty line, 32 percent of the kids; 75 percent of the children are at risk for hunger; 62.6 percent of babies born in Lawrence are born to unmarried mothers. But — here's the good news — at St. Patrick's, baptisms involving married Hispanic couples increased 100 percent in the last year.

"We went from one married couple to two out of 125 baptisms in the past year. Not bad, huh?" the priest said with a laugh.

There are a lot of stories in this one old parish located in an even older, troubled town. Too many to tell you in one day. So I'm going to adopt the place and occasionally bring you news from the front, where Paul O'Brien and the forgotten faithful, many of them poor, who fill the pews and the collection box, represent the firm future of a church where in the recent past the top too often ignored the bottom, the true foundation of the faith.



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