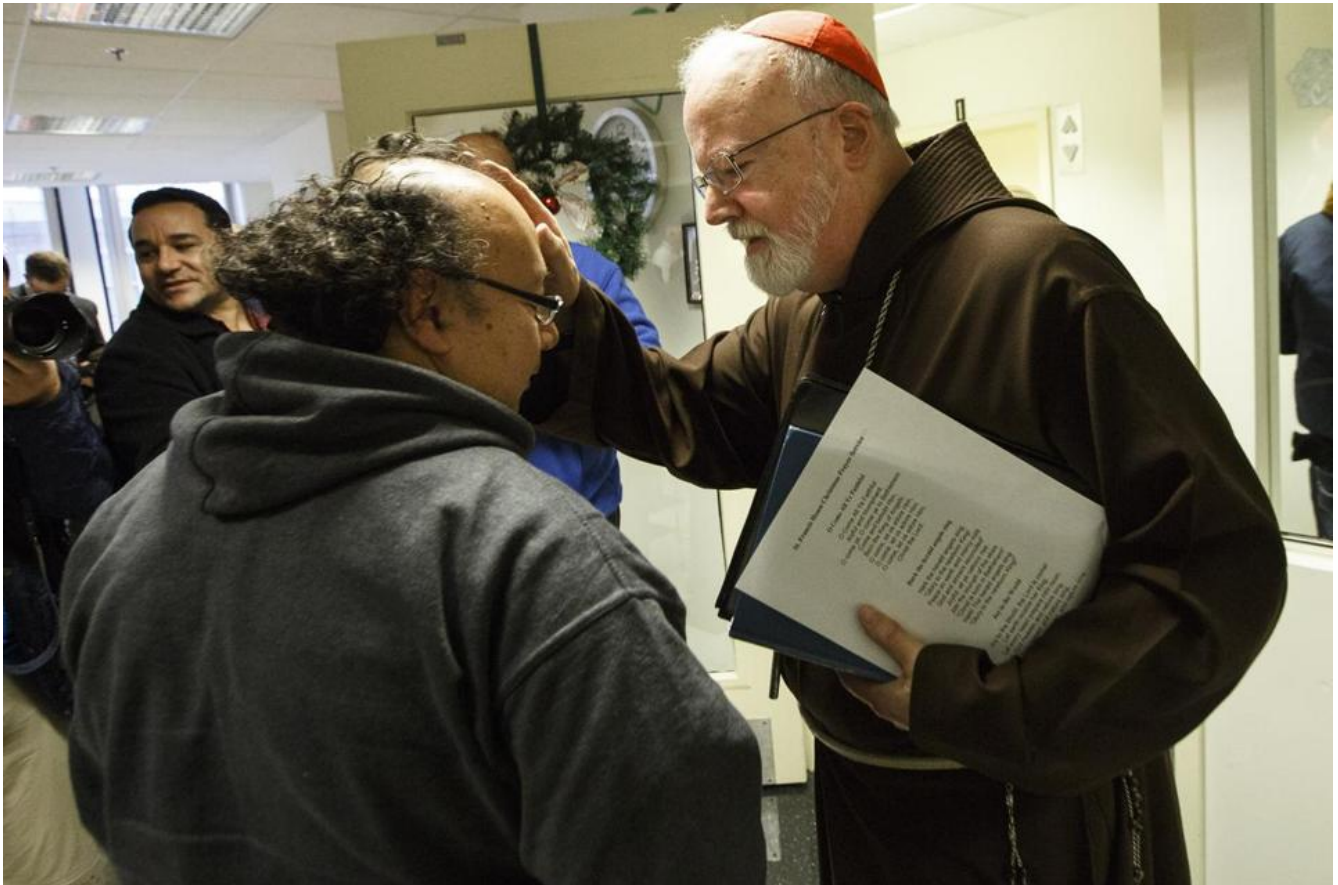


In Christmas homily, O'Malley focuses on the homeless



KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley met with residents and staffers at the St. Francis House homeless shelter in downtown Boston on Sunday.

By Nicole Fleming | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 25, 2016

Before Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley led Christmas Mass on Sunday morning for hundreds of parishioners in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, he first offered his homily to an intimate group of residents and staffers at the St. Francis House homeless shelter in downtown Boston.

The cardinal's address on the welfare of children, particularly homeless children, noted that God had encompassed all of his love for humanity in the gift of a small homeless child — his baby son, Jesus Christ.

“Jesus wants us to see our homeless brothers and sisters through his eyes,” said O'Malley, wearing simple brown vestments with a silver cross dangling from his neck as he addressed the small gathering in the shelter. “Jesus himself was homeless at birth.”

Following carols, residents and staff quietly approached the cardinal, shaking his hand and asking for blessings.

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Karen LaFrazia, president and chief executive of St. Francis House, said the cardinal's annual Christmas visit is deeply meaningful to many of the shelter's residents who “feel like everybody's forgotten them.”

“There's no poverty greater than the feeling of being unloved,” LaFrazia said. “That pain is especially acute at Christmas. So for us to mark this occasion with something just a little bit more special — it really does send a message of love.”

An hour later, O'Malley led a procession through the South End church under ornate architecture and colorful stained glass windows as parishioners sang “O Come All Ye Faithful.” He wore a red and gold mitre with white and gold vestments but preached the same message.

“The Christmas story is about a homeless child,” O'Malley said. “There are so many homeless in our city — so many homeless because of economic distress, mental illness, addictions, lack of affordable housing, unemployment.”

The Diocese has a housing division that assists in converting buildings to low-income housing, O'Malley said, including a partnership with St. Francis House to develop a 46-unit building — visible from the window of the fifth-floor room of the shelter where he gave his homily — with residences for the homeless as well as subsidized units for working people.

“Every time we try to convert a building into housing with maybe a hundred units, there will be 5,000 applications,” O'Malley said after the service at the church.

“There are many people who are working full-time and homeless.”

Attending Mass on Christmas Day “fills our life with the spiritual truth of Christmas, instead of concentrating so much on materialism,” said Marisol Blake of Amherst, who attended the service with her husband, Charles Blake.

Nicola De Santis, the Italian consul general in Boston, had already visited a church in the North End with his family earlier Sunday morning, but he also attended the Mass at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross to hear the cardinal speak.

“It's very important for all of us, Catholic and non-, to remember what's the real meaning of the holiday, which is giving love — and giving love to those who don't have much,” said De Santis, accompanied by his wife, three children, parents, and brother.

During his homily, O'Malley spoke about how a homeless woman came to the cathedral rectory last week because she wanted to give a gift to a child at the church's “giving tree.” It reminded him, he said, of Jesus bringing his disciples to a temple to see a widow giving her last penny to the collection.

“When you give gifts at Christmas, don't always give to those who can reciprocate,” O'Malley said. “Give to those who receive from no one and cannot give you anything in return.”

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