

NEWS RELEASE

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COUNCIL OF PARISHES PROTESTS VIGIL ARREST, CALLS FOR ARCHDIOCESE TO DROP TRESPASSING CHARGES *Council demands assurance that parishioners will not be arrested*

(Boston) — The Council of Parishes protests in the strongest terms the forcible removal and arrest Saturday, November 6, of Eugene Sweeney, a 69-year-old Woburn resident and longtime parishioner of Immaculate Conception in Winchester, after the parish's final Mass.

The Council of Parishes demands that the archdiocese immediately and publicly urge the District Attorney of Middlesex County to drop the charge of trespassing pending against Sweeney, who is scheduled to be arraigned on Friday, November 12. Sweeney was arrested as he peacefully began a silent protest of the closing of the parish by remaining in the church in prayer after the last Mass. The parish administrator, Rev. Thomas Foley, asked a parishioner, a member of the Winchester police department (not in uniform at the time) to have Sweeney physically removed by the Winchester police. Two uniformed Winchester police officers arrived and carried Sweeney bodily out of the church, handcuffed him, placed him under arrest for trespassing, and took him to the Winchester police station where he was held until bailed out.

Sweeney's arrest is unconscionable under civil law: it is fundamentally wrong to have a senior parishioner, sitting quietly alone and peacefully in his church for a final good-bye, forcibly removed from his place of sanctuary, and placed under arrest. The explanation from the archdiocese, that there was concern for Sweeney's safety and concern that he would disrupt the final Mass, is a distortion of the facts: the Mass was over, and Sweeney was alone in the church and tranquil. His arrest also is contrary to the Catholic Church's longstanding practice of providing sanctuary from arrest. Sweeney clearly requested sanctuary from Fr. Foley.

The archdiocese has stated that Fr. Foley's actions do not represent a change in the policies of the archdiocese with regard to parishes and parishioners maintaining vigils and that he did not take those actions at the direction of the archdiocese. The archdiocese therefore should ensure that these charges are dropped, since they are responsible for the actions of their employee, Fr. Foley. In addition, the archdiocese should state unequivocally its policy vis-à-vis parishioners in peaceful and prayerful vigil to ensure that this policy is understood and followed.

The Council of Parishes supports archdiocesan parishes in vigil or subject to closing, and provides a forum for parishes, parishioners and laity to communicate with the archdiocese.