

Priest honored for church's turnaround

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BEVERLY - When the Rev. David Barnes took over at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church, he was the youngest pastor in the Archdiocese of Boston and the church was \$748,000 in debt.

Nearly three years later, Barnes, now 35, is still the youngest pastor in the diocese. But the debt is gone, and so are doubts about the future of the city's largest Catholic church.

For presiding over that turnaround, Barnes was named priest of the year at the third annual Boston Men's Catholic Conference last weekend. More than 3,000 people attended the conference on Saturday at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

Barnes was nominated by his parishioners and was selected as the winner by a five-person committee from among about 70 other priests.

"The fact that he was a rookie pastor and was able to pull that off tremendously impressed the committee," said Scot Landry, a co-founder of the Boston Men's Catholic Conference. "We were surprised he was able to accomplish so much in such a short period of time without much experience."

Barnes said he appreciates the award, but is also a bit embarrassed by the attention.

"All the good things here are because everyone's working together, not because of one person," he said.

Parishioners aren't surprised by Barnes' modest reaction.

"That's what makes him who he is," said Carol Augulewicz, who volunteers on the church finance council. "He's very humble, and he's always open to people's advice."

At the age of 32, Barnes was appointed pastor of St. Mary's on Aug. 1, 2004. The parish had run up \$748,000 in debt under former pastor Charles Hughes, who was reassigned by the archdiocese.

No wrongdoing was suspected, but the mismanagement left the youthful Barnes facing a difficult challenge. Weekly collections were down 10 percent and enrollment at the parish elementary school had declined from 250 to 200.

A new spirit

Barnes did not perform any miracles in wiping out the debt. St. Mary's sold a piece of vacant land on Brimbal Avenue that it had owned for years, for \$2.2 million. That not only erased the debt but left the

church with a surplus.

But in a letter to parishioners at the time, Barnes warned that St. Mary's needed to change its ways.

"If we fail to pay for current expenses with current income," he wrote, "the future of St. Mary Star of the Sea Parish is in serious doubt."

Parishioners say Barnes deserves credit for stabilizing the church finances, but they say that is a mere byproduct of the spiritual impact he has had on the parish.

"The finances are a piece of it, no doubt," said Neil Corcoran, who is board president of St. Mary's School. "He's stepped into a somewhat challenging situation and has been instrumental in turning it around. But he's our spiritual leader, too, and that's what he does best. He has genuinely tried to bring people back to the church during a time that has been difficult for this diocese."

Since Barnes took over, weekly collections have gone from an average of \$6,000 to \$9,200, according to Augulewicz. She said Barnes has brought back such traditions as the annual 40-hour Devotion to the Eucharist and the Corpus Christi Procession. The downtown church, which was built in 1898, is also undergoing \$300,000 in improvements, including the painting of its majestic upper church.

"I think his strength is that people are drawn to him and people become drawn to the church," Augulewicz said. "He's always giving us the opportunity to grow in our faith. And as people grow in their faith, they want to become more involved and are more invested in the church. People become more faithful and they give more."

Happy to stay

Barnes, the son of a police officer, grew up in Quincy and attended Sacred Heart elementary school. After graduating from Archbishop Williams High School, he entered St. John's Seminary in Boston and spent eight years in the undergraduate and graduate programs.

He was ordained in 1997 and served for three years at St. Joseph's in Arlington before coming to St. Mary's. He served for four years as Hughes' parochial vicar before taking over as pastor.

Barnes said he doesn't know how long he'll be at St. Mary's. But he mentioned former pastor John Degan's 42-year tenure from 1916 to 1958 and said he wouldn't mind trying to match that.

Parishioners like Corcoran, who was married in the church, wouldn't mind, either.

"It feels good to be part of a community that has so much life, and Father Barnes is really a reflection of that," he said. "He's a young guy, but he's wise beyond his years."

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