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Popular priest takes leave of absence

BY GLORIA LaBOUNTY / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

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ATTLEBORO — Parishioners of St. Stephen's Church were stunned by an announcement during last weekend's Masses that their beloved pastor, the Rev. William Boffa, had taken a leave of absence for treatment of depression.

“ We were certainly very surprised,” said Claire Beauregard, a long-time parishioner who said there had been no indication that Father Boffa would be leaving.

“ All of our family holds him in very high regard. He is a wonderful priest and pastor,” Beauregard said. “ It was a shock and a disappointment for us.”

The announcement was made in the form of a letter from Father Boffa to the parishioners. It was read at all the Masses by the Rev. James Morse, who has been assigned temporarily to the church on South Main Street in Dodgeville.

Father Boffa said in his letter that he requested a leave of absence to deal with issues related to stress and depression. He asked parishioners to pray for his healing and his return to priestly ministry, and thanked them for their support during his five years as their pastor.

Father Boffa also said in his letter that he would always have a fondness for “ the little church with the big heart.”

John Kearns, spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fall River, said Wednesday the leave had been granted by Bishop Sean O'Malley based on Father Boffa's request.

Kearns said there is no set time period for the leave. He said Father Boffa has asked that his whereabouts not be announced.

Father Morse will now be serving in a temporary capacity, Kearns said. His most recent assignment had been at Our Lady of Victory Church in Centerville.

Beauregard was a lector at the 8 a.m. Mass last weekend, and said she had no idea that Father Boffa had asked for a leave until Father Morse read the letter.

“ A lot of us were moved to tears,” she said.

Beauregard was so choked up that she said she could not finish leading the opening prayer.

“ Everyone is concerned for him,” she said. “ We are all hoping he is OK.”

Beauregard said she was astonished to hear about the depression after the wonderful year that Father Boffa and the parish had in 2000 in celebrating the 125th anniversary of St. Stephen's, and the 25th anniversary of Father Boffa's ordination.

Yet she said she can understand the stress that pastors experience in trying to handle all the duties and obligations of a parish, even a small one such as St. Stephen's.

“ We hope this leave of absence will be sufficient for whatever ails him,” Beauregard said. “ We all love him and miss him, and hope he is well.”

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