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Amid furor, priest gets support

Most of flock backs sermon calling for pope to resign



The Rev. James J. Scahill greeted people after Sunday's Mass. (Michele McDonald for The New York Times)

By Lisa Wangsness and Matt Rocheleau
Globe Staff | Globe Correspondent / April 13, 2010

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EAST LONGMEADOW — The Rev. James J. Scahill describes himself as “rather a reclusive person.” He insists he is no rebel.

But the parish priest from East Longmeadow was fielding media calls from around the country yesterday about his request from the pulpit on Sunday that Pope Benedict XVI step down over his handling of clergy sexual abuse.

In an interview, Scahill sounded exhausted but firm as he reasserted his critique of the pope: “The right thing is to be truthful, and if he is not up to dealing with this, then he should have the integrity to resign.”

Scahill has been an outspoken critic of the church’s handling of sexual abuse cases since shortly after he arrived at St. Michael’s church in 2002, the year the clergy abuse scandal exploded in Massachusetts.

He infuriated the local church hierarchy by withholding payments to the Springfield Diocese until it did away with a fund to assist dismissed priests.

He made national news by pressing for a fuller investigation of the 1972 killing of a Springfield boy whose parents attribute their son’s death to an abusive priest.

And he helped to reveal the sexual misconduct of former Springfield Bishop Thomas L. Dupre, who abruptly resigned after he was confronted with accusations that he had abused children as a parish priest.

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“Most of what Father Scahill charged was true, and what he asked for, in a fairly sharp tone of voice, was often what many people would regard as necessary,” said David O’Brien, professor emeritus of history at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester.

Yesterday, walking from his office to the church where a local television crew was waiting, Scahill said the reaction to his homily has been overwhelmingly supportive.

“I’m simply speaking the truth,” he said. “Sometimes the truth can be harsh.”

He said he hoped there would be “a grass-roots insurrection of calling for accountability.”

Opinion did seem to be running strongly in his favor at Romito & Sons Delicatessen on North Main Street, not far from St. Michael’s.

Lifelong Catholics MaryAnn O’Hagan, 60, and her husband, Carl Gahm, 71, said Scahill’s sermons have kept them attending Mass each week, in spite of their dismay over the church leadership’s handling of the sexual abuse scandal.

“To come out with the courage Father Scahill did was incredible,” said Gahm. “Not one single bishop, archbishop, or cardinal has called for a resignation or accountability of the pope.”

For Don Millett, however, who often attends Mass at St. Michael’s but was not there Sunday, it went a bit too far. “When you go to church, that’s not what you want to deal with,” he said.

Friends and parishioners say Scahill, 63, never sought the role of lead advocate for victims of sexual abuse. But the more he has spoken out for them, the more they have sought his counsel — and the more he has felt compelled to speak critically of the hierarchy.

“Everyone knows how horrific it’s been for him, and it’s taken a toll physically on him to hear their stories,” said Ruth Connor, a 77-year-old parishioner.

But Scahill’s parish has flourished. Connor said people flock to the church from surrounding communities to hear Scahill preach, and he received standing ovations for his sermon on Sunday.

Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell of Springfield declined an interview request but issued a statement declaring that it was a “sad irony” that Scahill made his remarks on Divine Mercy Sunday, a day when the church reaffirms “forgiveness, reconciliation, and mercy” toward followers of Jesus.

“The Holy Father, our bishops and the Church leadership throughout the world know how difficult it is for those who have suffered abuse at the hands of the clergy who should have been signs of God’s love rather than inflictors of pain,” McDonald said.

Those who know Scahill well say they understand his doubts about church leaders.

“These aren’t just character flaws against people, these were crimes against children,” said the Rev. Joseph M. Soranno, pastor of St. Cecilia’s in Wilbraham.

Soranno, a roommate of Scahill’s when the two were seminarians in the 1970s, said Scahill was anxious about his sermon and when it was over, as the two were having dinner at a restaurant that night, he looked weary but relieved.

“You’ve got to take a stand, and you’ve got to protect the rights of people who are without a voice,” Soranno said.

Correction: This story has been revised because of a reporting error that cited

David O'Brien's former title at the College of the Holy Cross. He is currently professor emeritus of history and Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross.

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