

They come - sick, weary, or desperate - seeking his touch The Boston Globe November 5, 2006 Sunday

The Boston Globe

November 5, 2006 Sunday  
FIRST EDITION

## They come - sick, weary, or desperate - seeking his touch

**BYLINE:** Kathleen Burge GLOBE STAFF

**SECTION:** CITY; Pg. Reg1

**LENGTH:** 1041 words

### CITY WEEKLY / ROXBURY

The woman in the green coat is angling for a blessing from Father McDonough. Another priest has already splashed her with holy water, but she won't settle for anyone other than the 85-year-old man who, she believes, has twice healed her damaged heart.

She slips past the assistants who flock around him and whispers in the priest's ear. As he gently pushes against her forehead with a hand as dry and light as a fallen leaf, she falls backward, her body plank straight, into the arms of a waiting assistant.

For 30 years, the Rev. Edward McDonough has led healing services at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Roxbury's Mission Hill, better known as Mission Church.

Skeptics may scoff, but believers say his touch and his prayers have banished cancer, pain, depression, and many other ailments and afflictions from their bodies, minds, and souls. He is an octogenarian with a website, [fathermcdonough.org](http://fathermcdonough.org), and his healing ministry includes a prayer line and daily radio programs. The cellphone in the pocket of his black cardigan rings often.

It is almost impossible to be Catholic in Boston and not know about McDonough. He has preached to packed churches around the world, and, wherever he goes, people want to touch him.

People come seeking blessings - the sick and the weary and the desperate, the frantic parents of gravely ill children, the anonymous men and women who whisper their troubles to the man in the white robe and the red stole.

During McDonough's recent stay at Massachusetts General Hospital, nurses had to keep away those seeking healing so the priest could rest.

Faith healing is controversial in the medical community because doctors often fear that followers will not seek medical care, said **Linda Barnes**, associate professor of pediatrics and family medicine at the Boston University School of Medicine.

"My sense is that the scientific literature has stayed away from what are often looked at as faith healers because of a fairly high degree of skepticism," she said.

"That doesn't mean that there aren't individual doctors who say, 'I've seen it happen, and I don't know how it works.'"

To nonbelievers, the stories of McDonough's work seem improbable; to believers, they are miraculous:

When a 3-year-old girl fell from a staircase at an Irish step-dancing school earlier this year and lay at Children's Hospital in serious condition, friends called McDonough. (He visited the girl and prayed for her; she made a full recovery, according to friends of the family.) When a 5-year-old-girl from the Cape was diagnosed with a brain tumor, her parents drove through a snowstorm to seek out McDonough. (She's now free of cancer, her father said.) When a Dorchester woman watched two friends struggle with miscarriage and infertility, she persuaded them to see McDonough. (They're now both pregnant, the friend testified at a healing service.)

They come - sick, weary, or desperate - seeking his touch The Boston Globe November 5, 2006 Sunday

McDonough's monthly healing services in the basilica last 2 1/2 hours and are run more like Protestant revivals than Catholic ceremonies.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, McDonough didn't appear until after nearly a half-hour of singing. Then, a lay minister announces, "Let's all stand and greet Father McDonough."

When the priest walks gingerly from the sacristy to the altar, a few hundred worshipers stand and clap boisterously. When McDonough reaches the microphone and starts to speak, words fight to escape his lips. In the echoing, cavernous church, it is difficult to make out his words.

After more singing, he escorts people to the altar to tell their stories of healing. A man named Jack tells the crowd about an excruciatingly painful disintegration of the vertebrae in his neck. He sought healing from McDonough and then went for an MRI. His doctor, he says, was dumbfounded.

"I don't know what to say, but whatever you had has disappeared," he recalls the doctor telling him.

"Glory to God!" shouts a man from his pew.

"I believe it is due to Father McDonough's healing," Jack says.

McDonough used to run the service himself, but now relies on other priests and lay people for help. Near the end of the service, the men split up into the crowd. Those in the know realize that McDonough himself will offer blessings to the center row of pews, which are the most crowded.

McDonough walks surrounded by a team of aides who carry extra bottles of holy water, catch the faithful as they fall backward from the priest's touch, and generally keep order in the church. Falling backward, they believe, signifies a deep spiritual experience; the phenomenon is called "resting in the Holy Spirit."

Long before McDonough arrived as a priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the church was known for stories of miraculous healing. A shrine near the altar holds a few dozen crutches and metal leg braces left behind by those who said they were cured by praying to a painting, an icon of the Virgin Mary.

McDonough grew up in the parish. He was one of five children whose mother, an Irish immigrant, attended 5:30 Mass each morning. He recalls that when he was young, he came down with double-lobe pneumonia, which had already killed several other neighborhood children.

But his mother prayed at the shrine, and he survived. "God healed me through my mother," he says.

After he was ordained a priest, McDonough says, he was turned off by television preachers. But when he was stationed in Maryland in the 1960s, he saw his first Catholic charismatic prayer meetings and was intrigued. After he prayed with worshippers one night, five people came back and said the priest had healed them.

McDonough returned to Boston in 1974 and obtained permission from Cardinal Humberto S. Medeiros to continue his healing services. He began holding services in his sister's house and later moved from chapel to chapel as the crowd of worshipers grew, until he eventually ended up in Mission Church. Buses that brought hundreds of worshipers from around the region idled on Tremont Street.

Today, after marking three decades of services in Mission Hill, McDonough shuns his celebrity. He repeatedly tells interviewers and starry-eyed worshippers alike that God does all the work.

"It isn't anything I do," he says. "Basically, I have to show up."

Kathleen Burge can be reached at [kburge@globe.com](mailto:kburge@globe.com).