

For second time, Vatican keeps parishes open

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) For the second time in recent months, the Vatican has overruled a U.S. bishop's decision to close churches in his diocese, a rare reversal that Catholic activists hope heralds a new trend.

The Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy has ruled that the Diocese of Allentown (Pa.) did not present "grave" reasons for shuttering nine churches in 2008.

The Allentown ruling, which was first reported by The Associated Press on Sunday (March 5), follows a similar decision made public last month in Springfield, Mass.

In both cases, the Congregation for the Clergy ruled that the local bishop could terminate parishes but should not close their church buildings, said Charles Wilson of the St. Joseph Foundation in San Antonio, which provides lay Catholics with guidance on canon law. Such rulings are rare, Wilson added.

Allentown spokesman Matt Kerr told the AP, "The buildings, in some cases, may have to be used for sacred purposes. What exactly that is, we're trying to figure out."

Springfield Bishop Timothy McDonnell is asking the Vatican for

clarification of his ruling, saying the Congregation for the Clergy "seems to be undertaking a new application of church law."

Peter Borre, a Boston activist who fights church closings, estimates that 70 appeals from lay Catholics across at least 16 dioceses have been filed with the Vatican in recent years.

An upcoming decision on an appeal from Cleveland Catholics will test whether the Vatican has adopted a sweeping new policy, he said.

"If the Congregation for the Clergy rules for those Cleveland churches, it's safe to conclude there's been a major policy shift in Rome," Borre said.