

Vatican orders Cleveland bishop to reverse church closures

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CLEVELAND (RNS) In an extraordinary move, the Vatican has reversed the closure of 13 churches in the Diocese of Cleveland, saying the parishes must be restored and the sanctuaries reopened for worship, according to activists who fought the closings.

The diocese and Bishop Richard Lennon, who ordered the closures as part of a downsizing plan in 2009 and 2010, could appeal the reversals.

The 13 parishes had filed appeals with the Vatican after Lennon closed 50 churches, citing changes in demographics and shortages of priests and cash.

Since the closings, parishioners have been swamping Rome with flurries of letters, arguing that their parishes were vibrant communities wrongfully snuffed out by the diocese.

Some parishes like Cleveland's St. Patrick's Church hired Boston activist Peter Borre and canon lawyers in Rome to argue on their behalf.

Borre, who regularly traveled to Rome representing Cleveland parishes, said Wednesday (March 7) that the reversals of Lennon's closings are "unprecedented for Catholic America."

Borre said the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, the panel that handled the appeals, ruled in favor of the parishioners regarding both closing procedures and canon law.

"This is very significant because it means that Lennon erred procedurally and substantively," Borre said. "If he had been reversed only procedurally, he could reboot, start the procedure again and fix the procedural error."

"But he cannot fix a substantive error."

Borre said Lennon can either comply with the Vatican's decrees or, within 60 days, appeal to the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's supreme court. The bishop could also stall, saying he doesn't have enough priests or money to reconstitute the parishes, said Borre.

Robert Tayek, a spokesman for the diocese, said the rulings arrived from the Vatican late Wednesday afternoon and had not yet been reviewed by the bishop.

Announcements of the decrees came Wednesday from Borre and Patricia Schulte-Singleton, a member of St. Patrick's and the head of a grass-roots group, Endangered Catholics, which has been battling the closings.

Schulte-Singleton said she received a copy of St. Patrick's four-page decree early Wednesday from a canon lawyer in Rome who sent it via email.

"I can tell you it's spectacular news," she said. "It's a complete reversal of Bishop Lennon's order. Our prayers have been answered."

Bob Kloos, vice president of Endangered Catholics, characterized the reversals as "the most stunning" actions in Catholic American history. "It's incredible," he said. "Rome is saying to this bishop and to all the bishops: 'You can't close churches just because you don't have the money or the staff.' Budgetary constraints can't be used to suppress parishes."

Kloos, an ex-priest and a member of the Community of St. Peter, which broke away from the diocese and set up a sanctuary in a warehouse after Lennon closed its downtown church, said it is time for the Catholic hierarchy to think about ways to address the priest shortage, including allowing married clergy.

Sister Christine Schenk, a nun who heads FutureChurch, a liberal Cleveland-based group attempting to reform the church, said she was shocked, but pleased, by the Vatican's reversal of the Cleveland closings.

"Our hats are off to all the courageous parishioners who appealed," said Schenk. "This is their victory. Their rights have been vindicated. They said closing our churches wasn't right and the Vatican agreed."

"All the people constitute the church, not just the bishops."

Most of the 50 closed parishes were in inner-city neighborhoods in Cleveland and Akron. Many were ethnic.

More than 50 happy Polish Catholic parishioners held a vigil of thanks Wednesday night outside St. Casimir's Church, on Cleveland's East Side, which closed in 2009.

"We've stood out in the cold for 2 1/2 years every Sunday at 11:30 a.m. since, praying for news like this," said John Niedzialek, 53, who has lived in the neighborhood since he was 10. "I don't want to get too excited yet, but it looks like we might be soon standing in warmth inside this beautiful church."