

Cleveland Catholics are 'anxious and edgy' as parish reopenings drag on

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c. 2012 Religion News Service CLEVELAND (RNS) It's been nearly a month since Bishop Richard Lennon announced he would reopen 12 closed churches, but so far no shuttered sanctuaries have been resurrected.

As they wait, parishioners from some of the moribund parishes have begun organizing committees in preparation for the reopenings, which the diocese says are in process, although there's no official timetable.

At St. Mary Catholic Church in suburban Bedford, parishioners have formed a parish council, a finance committee and a music committee. And they have tied blue and white bows and a "Welcome Home" sign on the front of their church.

"We've got our committees organized," said St. Mary parishioner Carol Szczepanik. "We're just waiting for the bishop."

At St. Patrick in Cleveland, more than 50 people have been meeting regularly at a nearby Protestant church to discuss ways to raise money, rebuild their congregation and engage parishioners in helping to clean up and restore their mothballed worship site.

And at St. Barbara in Cleveland, about 50 people are working to reopen their parish, including passing out fliers in the neighborhood asking people to join the congregation.

"We're trying to keep the connections going," said parishioner Michael Minich, noting that while the church has been closed, thieves have stolen two air-conditioning units along with a metal flagpole, which they cut down with a hacksaw.

"I think people are excited about coming back," Minich said. "If we stay focused, we'll succeed."

The 12 churches were among 50 closed by Lennon over 15 months as part of a down-sizing plan, beginning in 2009. The bishop said the closings -- most of them in inner-city neighborhoods -- were the result of changing demographics and shortages of priests and cash.

But the 12 appealed to the Vatican, arguing they still had enough resources to sustain their parishes. In March, the Vatican upheld the 12 appeals, issuing each church a decree saying that Lennon did not properly follow canon law and procedures when he closed them.

Lennon decided not to appeal the decision, saying, "It's time for peace and unity in the Diocese of Cleveland."

At the news conference, the bishop said he could not say how soon the churches would reopen. He said his first order of business was to assign priests to the parishes.

"The complex process of appointing clergy leaders for the affected parishes has been moving forward steadily since the April 17 announcement and continues on a daily basis," diocesan spokesman Robert Tayek said.

But so far, no assignments have been publicly announced, frustrating some parishioners eager to return to their churches.

"We haven't heard anything," said Miklos Peller, who wrote the appeal for St. Emeric, a Hungarian parish. "We might have to stir up certain interests in Rome again because it looks like this is going to be dragged out. People are getting anxious and edgy."

Lennon leans strongly toward having priests -- not nuns or lay administrators -- running parishes. Given the scarcity of priests, some Catholics are wondering where Lennon is going to get 12 new pastors.

"Bishop Lennon and his staff are making every effort to appoint clergy from the Diocese of Cleveland to fulfill the pastoral leadership roles in the 12 parishes," Tayek said.

Lennon has started holding preliminary meetings with a handful of parishes to discuss the reopening process, including a Tuesday (May 15) meeting with parishioners from St. Barbara.

"He was very pleasant," said parishioner Michael Minich, who said the session lasted for about an hour and a half. "It was very informal."

Minich said the bishop told him that all money and sacred artifacts taken from St. Barbara when it closed will be returned. But he gave no date to reopen the church and named no pastor.

"His concern was our membership," said Minich, noting that Lennon said he wanted to meet with him and other parishioners again in a couple of weeks.