

NY Catholic archdiocese merges a third of its parishes

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November 4, 2014

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NEW YORK (RNS) The Archdiocese of New York, with the second-largest Catholic population in the country and an unparalleled place in U.S. church history, is shrinking: Cardinal Timothy Dolan on Sunday (November 2) announced that nearly a third of the archdiocese's 368 parishes would be merging, and some would close.

"This time of transition in the history of the archdiocese will undoubtedly be difficult for people who live in parishes that will merge," Dolan said in a statement. "There will be many who are hurt and upset as they experience what will be a change in their spiritual lives, and I will be one of them."

The reorganization was years in the making and some downsizing appeared inevitable, as happened in the last round of cutbacks, in 2007. While the sprawling archdiocese is still home to 2.8 million Catholics, fewer of them are attending mass or Catholic schools, and costs are rising. The archdiocese said it is spending \$40 million a year to prop up failing or redundant parishes.

Still, the extent of the changes, the largest in the more than 200-year history of the archdiocese, upset many Catholics, especially in neighborhoods where waves of immigration had built and revived parishes across the decades.

"I feel very sad; I was baptized here," Sonia Cintron, 75, a member of the Church of the Holy Rosary in East Harlem, told *The New York Times*. "Here we're family; we loved each other."

Some parishioners have vowed to try to keep their churches open through petitions and protests.

A total of 112 parishes will merge with a nearby church, and Masses and sacraments will cease to be celebrated "on a regular basis" at 31 parishes, meaning they would

effectively close. Religious services will continue at both churches at the other newly merged parishes.

The closings affect churches from Staten Island to Manhattan to the Hudson Valley in the counties above New York City. The changes will take effect August 1, 2015.

The downsizing in New York is not unique: Dioceses across the Northeast and Midwest that were once the cradle of U.S. Catholicism are facing declining donations and participation in church life. Parish and school closings and mergers have become a fact of life in Chicago and Boston, the third and fourth largest archdioceses, as well. (The Archdiocese of Los Angeles with 5 million Catholics is the largest in the U.S.)

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University said that the number of Catholic parishes in the U.S. peaked at 19,705 in 1988, but since then has dropped more than 10 percent, to just under 17,500 parishes.

But the downsizing is also regional. In the South and West, many dioceses are growing rapidly, bolstered by immigration from Mexico and Latin America and by an influx of retirees and Catholics moving from Northern states.

Still, the growth in new parishes is not enough to offset the closings. CARA reports that 61 new parishes were opened in the U.S. in 2013 while 190 parishes were closed.