

Massachusetts church vigil ending after 11 years

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(RNS) After 11 years of occupying a parish building that the Archdiocese of Boston ordered closed in 2004, the people of St. Frances X. Cabrini Church in Scituate, Massachusetts, are finally handing over the keys.

The tenacious protesters, angry their parish would be closed in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, lost their final Hail Mary bid to reopen the church May 16 when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear their case.

Having pursued all viable options, including a petition under canon law that was denied by the Vatican, the group plans to vacate after a final worship service on Sunday, May 29, according to Jon Rogers, co-founder of the Friends of St. Frances vigil group.

"We made a promise when we started this process that we would exhaust every avenue of appeal, and we have," Rogers said.

Working in shifts, a core group of some 100 parishioners has kept vigil 24/7 since October 26, 2004. They stored food in a pantry, kept sleeping bags in drawers, and took turns sleeping overnight in a former confessional-turned-guest room. Just one rule applied: Don't let the archdiocese come in and shut us down.

Reopening the parish was not their only goal. They were also determined to prevent the archdiocese, which agreed to an \$85 million settlement with clergy sexual abuse victims in 2003, from taking possession and replenishing its coffers by selling off the 1960s-era church building and its 30 valuable acres in an upscale suburb on the coast.

The parish was one of nine in the Boston area where parishioners refused to leave when the archdiocese undertook a massive restructuring that would shutter about

one-fifth of its 357 parishes.

Four of those vigils lasted at least four years, including one in Wellesley that endured until 2012. When Cabrini is vacated, the last of the Boston area vigils will be over, but allies say the impact is not finished.

“They set out deliberately to test both the civil law system and the canonical law system to the absolute limit, and that’s what they’ve done,” said Peter Borre, an adviser to parishes resisting closure through the church’s canon law system. “They have become the poster boys and girls for parishioners who won’t go quietly. And I think this has caused a change in attitude in Rome.”

For years, the archdiocese tried in vain to persuade the Friends of St. Frances to leave. When those efforts failed, the archdiocese sued to take possession and won, including two appeal verdicts. Now the church is ready to move on from what’s been a difficult, drawn-out chapter.

“Given the denial of the Friends of St. Frances Cabrini’s petition, we ask them to end their vigil and leave the property within 14 days in accordance with the agreement filed with the Superior Court,” the archdiocese said in a statement. “The parishes of the archdiocese welcome and invite those involved with the vigil to participate and join in the fullness of parish life.”

Those who’ve kept vigil have no plans to join another archdiocesan parish, Rogers said. Nor will they end their uninterrupted pattern of gathering weekly for mass. But changes are in store as the congregation morphs into what Rogers calls “an all-inclusive, independent Catholic church” with no Roman Catholic affiliation.

Newly reconstituted as the Church of America, the congregation will hold its first worship service on June 5 at a rented facility in Scituate. Holy Communion will be done differently. At Cabrini for the past 11 years, churchgoers have received elements consecrated in advance by sympathetic priests and administered by laity. At the Church of America, clergy from various denominations will take turns presiding, as will former Catholic priests who left the priesthood to get married.

The Church of America aims to draw heavily from the ranks of Roman Catholics who stopped attending mass after the abuse crisis came to light or who quit the church entirely.

“You have a large, disenfranchised group of people out there who are faithful Catholics and who are no longer served because their churches have been taken from them, destroyed and sold off to the highest bidder,” Rogers said. “We believe this is an incredible opportunity for us to re-evangelize.”

Other Catholic activists agreed with the notion that the faithful were disenfranchised in this episode.

“We’re sad that neither the Vatican nor the civil courts would recognize the rights of the faith community to keep its church open,” wrote Nick Ingala, spokesperson for Voice of the Faithful, a lay Catholic reform group that formed during the abuse crisis, in an e-mail.

Though protesters will no longer keep vigil, they aim to keep vigilant.

They’ve had plenty of practice. Keeping watch has meant being always ready to make three calls—to the police, the attorneys, and the news media—if anyone should ever arrive to evict or change locks. That never happened. So now they’re packing up their toaster ovens, lamps, and sleeping bags with hopes of transporting vigilance to a new place.

“What the 11 years has taught us is that God wants us to go in this direction,” Rogers said. “And that’s to probably go back to the basics of his word and our faith and recreate it in a transparent and all-welcoming environment.”