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New Orleans parish to reopen as charismatic center

Zoe Ryan | Jan. 9, 2012

Former parishioners clap and give a thumbs-up to Harold Baquet after he was forced out of the closed Our Lady of Good Counsel Church to be escorted home by New Orleans police officers in 2009. Attorney Lee Madere, who claimed to be acting pro bono on behalf of the parish, thrust his body on top of the police car and tried to stop it from moving. Baquet, along with Fortier and Peterson, was one of four p

Before, during, and after Our Lady of Good Counsel in New Orleans closed in 2008, parishioners were sad. And angry. And dedicated: They kept vigil in the church for three months until police officers forced them out.

But now, the disappointment is eroding to appreciation.

The New Orleans archdiocese announced last month that the Center of Jesus the Lord, a charismatic Catholic community, would move into the empty church building of Our Lady of Good Counsel, located in the Garden District. Although it will not be a parish and cannot offer parish programs, the community will use the space for Mass and other charitable activities.

"We're very pleased," said Barbara Fortier, the parish council president of the former Our Lady of Good Counsel and a parishioner there for 26 years. "It's been a difficult couple of years, but we've been very prayerful and very appreciative and thankful for [New Orleans] Archbishop [Gregory] Aymond's compassion and his willingness to have a dialogue with us."

The archdiocese also is allowing former parishioners to use the building for weddings and funerals.

The thrust of this move, New Orleans native Aymond told *NCR*, was to bring about reconciliation and to utilize a church that had been closed.

"I'm very optimistic, very hopeful" about the move, he said. The process of discernment has been very positive from Our Lady of Good Counsel and Center of Jesus the Lord, he said.

"It definitely is and will be a sign of healing in the community," he said.

Four parishioners chosen to represent the former parish met with Aymond since he arrived as archbishop in New Orleans in 2009. Fortier and JoAnn Peterson were among them.

"[Aymond] truly cared about how hurt the parishioners were," said Peterson, whose family connection with Our Lady of Good Counsel dates back to the early 1900s. Parishioners "welcome the opportunity to share this sacred space with them," she said.

Center of Jesus the Lord, whose building was in bad shape, was a good match for the church building, Aymond said.

By meeting with former Our Lady of Good Counsel parishioners, Aymond said he had three goals: to "hear them out" and walk in some of their pain and disappointment, to bring about reconciliation, and to put the building to use.

"And he really let people express their emotions," Fortier said. "People were very angry, people were very hurt, and he was willing to listen. And that was all part of the healing process for us: gaining of trust because a lot of people had lost some trust in the diocese. And it just builds a strong, fond friendship and a fondness between the people, the community of Our Lady of Good Counsel and Archbishop Aymond."

For the past two years, Aymond allowed Our Lady of Good Counsel parishioners to use the church building for Mass on the feast day of Our Lady of Good Counsel, and parishioners could pray the rosary there every Wednesday evening, Fortier said.

In his book, *Render Unto Rome*, Jason Berry, another New Orleans native, describes a far different scene in 2008: Police "beating down a door at Good Counsel and arresting people from both parishes was like a whiplash to many people." The archbishop at the time of the mergers, Alfred Hughes, apologized at his retirement press conference for any harm he caused, Berry writes.

Many former parishioners shifted to Good Shepherd Parish, a church that resulted in the merger of Our Lady of Good Council, St. Henry Catholic Church and St. Stephen Catholic Church.

Aymond has been meeting with St. Henry parishioners, and though no plans have emerged, the archbishop said he is "committed" to the parishioners.

Parishioners of St. Henry are allowed to use the building for the rosary on Wednesday nights and, by request, can use it for funerals.

Hurricane Katrina damaged many Catholic church buildings in 2005 and some Catholics never returned after flood waters receded. In 2005, before Katrina, the archdiocese had 490,898 Catholics; in 2007, the number was 372,037. However, today the number has increased to 485,973 Catholics.

[Zoe Ryan is an *NCR* staff writer. Her email address is **zryan@ncronline.org**.]

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