News

A white man wears a gold mitre and vestments and sits in an ornate chair holding a crozier

Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski of St. Louis is seen during his installation Mass Aug. 25, 2020 at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. The Archdiocese of St. Louis has suspended mergers of several parishes that are appealing their closures to the Vatican. (OSV News photo/Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review)

Gina Christian

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Mergers for several Archdiocese of St. Louis parishes are temporarily on hold pending an appeal to the Vatican by parishioners.

In a July 31 statement, the archdiocese announced that Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski had "suspended the effects" for seven parishes with respect to the All Things New initiative, a pastoral planning process that would reduce the number of archdiocesan parishes from 178 to 134. Declines in the number of priests, Mass attendees and revenues were all cited by the archdiocese as the key drivers of the effort.

But seven parishes slated to merge under the plan chose to "pursue hierarchical recourse with the Vatican's Dicastery for the Clergy," said the archdiocese in its

statement.

Those parishes are St. Angela Merici, Florissant; St. Catherine of Alexandria, Coffman; St. Francis of Assisi, Luebbering; St. Martin of Tours, Lemay; St. Matthew the Apostle, St. Louis; St. Richard, Creve Coeur; and St. Roch, St. Louis.

The archdiocese said in its statement that "out of respect for each parishioner’s right to this recourse and in keeping with Archbishop Rozanski’s desire to maintain access to the sacraments, we will be suspending the effects of the following All Things New decrees" for those seven parishes "until this process has been exhausted."

Lisa Shea, archdiocesan director of community and media engagement, told OSV News by phone that there are "no immediate plans to close or sell any churches" in the archdiocese.

"They will all remain open in some capacity for worship for the foreseeable future," she said. "We have a couple of personal parishes in the city that are really well known for their social justice works, such as food pantries, and while their parishes are closing, the churches are staying open to do all those good works."

The archdiocese said in its statement that it will proceed with the reassignment of priests, stating that incoming pastors for the seven parishes challenging the mergers "should not make changes in parish life which would be difficult to reverse," including the sale of parish property.

Word of the suspension came as "a welcome announcement," Sean McGroarty of St. Roch Parish, which was set to merge with Christ the King, told OSV News.

McGroarty, president of that parish school's board, had along with other parish lay leaders encouraged concerned parishioners to write to Rozanski to appeal the decision to merge St. Roch with Christ the King Parish.

He told OSV News that amid its All Things New initiative, "the archdiocese missed an opportunity to strategically address the issues they're trying to address."

"The problem, they said, is that there are not enough priests, but their solution seems to be simply moving priests to places where there are more Catholics," he said, noting that such transfers disproportionately impact smaller parishes and those with greater minority populations.

Allowing qualified lay faithful to assume greater co-responsibility for parishes would help address clerical shortages and avert parish closings and mergers, said McGroarty.

"You want priests to care for the universal good of the flock, to administer the sacraments," he said. "You don't necessarily need them to administer finances in parishes and schools. If they (the archdiocese) had been able to separate that, it might have been a more helpful process. There are laypeople who would love to do all those things."

Ken Battis, president of Save Our St. Louis Parishes, told OSV News he hoped the "pause will give us time for actually dialoguing" about All Things New, adding that "there are at least six or seven other parishes we're aware of who are appealing" the decrees.

In an email to OSV News, Shea, the archdiocese's director of community and media engagement, said that "in each case where a parishioner has proposed to the Archbishop valid recourse to the Dicastery for the Clergy within the time limit permitted by canon law, Archbishop Rozanski has issued a decree suspending the effects."

However, "in instances where a parishioner proposed recourse directly to the Dicastery for the Clergy, we do not know if said parishioner sought an interim suspension of the decree," she added. "In these cases, we must wait until we receive notification and direction from the Dicastery."

Battis' organization, comprised of lay volunteers, has been working to "ask questions and be heard by Archdiocesan leadership" about All Things New as part of its "canon law right and responsibility," according to its website.

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Aided by canon lawyer Philip Gray, president of the Ohio-based St. Joseph Foundation, "we work within the authority of the church to engage in dialogue before decisions," Battis told OSV News.

Along with Gray, the group enlisted former Missouri state Sen. Robert Onder as a procurator, or advocate, under canon law, endorsed by more than 3,100 faithful with

respect to the All Things New matter, said Battis.

In March, Onder sent Rozanski a letter formally opposing the plan and calling for "collaborative dialogue."

On its website, the archdiocese stated that the two-year process underlying All Things New included close to 350 listening sessions at 178 parishes; a survey of 18,000 parish school parents, administrators, teachers, staff, donors, community partners and volunteers; meetings with community, civic and business organizations; focus groups; and individual and group conversations at both deanery and parish levels.

In addition, the archdiocese analyzed sacramental, financial and demographic statistics over the last decade for every parish and school in the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

The archdiocese also assessed some 70,000 responses to the Disciple Maker Index, a survey developed by the Pennsylvania-based Catholic Leadership Institute.

The project's planning committee drafted three different models for the initiative, while the archdiocesan priest council provided "consultative input to the Archbishop" in reviewing parish-related data.

Among the archbishop's advisers were parish leaders, the archdiocesan pastoral and finance councils, and members of archdiocesan subcommittees for evangelization, youth, young adult and social justice ministries.

The archdiocese also provided detailed information on its website regarding the appeals process under canon law 1734.

Yet Battis said sessions with the faithful generally involved "pre-recorded video with Archbishop Rozanski or Father Chris Martin," the archdiocese's vicar for parish mission and vitality.

"Why not have the dialogue (in person)?" said Battis. "You could have a Q&A session."

Among the numerous concerns cited by Onder was the archdiocese's use of the Disciple Maker Index. Describing it as a"one-size-fits-all" assessment tool, Onder said the survey was designed for use in cultivating faith renewal, not pastoral

restructuring. He also said that the data collected from the reported 70,000 survey respondents in the archdiocese had not been shared with parishes.

In an email to OSV News, Catholic Leadership Institute communications director Mary Serafino confirmed that her organization "has assisted Archbishop Rozanski with the recent pastoral planning efforts," but referred further inquiry on the matter back to the archdiocese.

Both Battis and McGroarty said they fear the loss of parishioners from parish mergers.

"It’s frightening and very disconcerting," said McGroarty. "We're a community, and we're used to going to Mass and seeing people from the neighborhood each week. And that might happen partially (following a merger) … but a lot of people are disgusted by this process and will just not go. So we lose that community, which is hurtful."

The two also stressed their prayerful support for Rozanski and archdiocesan leaders, and the desire to work more closely with them in fostering parish vibrancy.

"We may not agree, but surely we can agree on praying together," said Battis. "We can at least say the rosary together for souls who may leave the church (following parish mergers). The church has its buildings, and it needs good administrators, but in the end the mission is to save souls and to belong to Christ."

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