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Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski of St. Louis is seen during his installation Mass Aug. 25, 2020 at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. (OSV News/St. Louis Review/Lisa Johnston)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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I was surprised recently to learn that Rome's Dicastery for the Clergy upheld two more parish merger recourses opposing St. Louis Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski's decision to merge their parishes. This makes an unprecedented three merger appeals won by St. Louis Catholics determined to defend their parish homes.

Historically Rome has upheld bishops in merging a parish but upheld Catholics who appealed the relegation of their church to profane use — usually prior to being sold. In other words, the bishop could close their parish but not — if Catholics appealed — close and sell their church. Now, it appears Catholics have a chance of winning both types of appeals.

The dicastery did not find just cause for St. Angela Merici Parish to be merged with St. Norbert and Holy Name of Jesus parishes. Neither did the dicastery find just cause to merge St. Martin of Tours Parish in Lemay, Missouri, with St. Mark parish. In an earlier Feb. 5, 2024 ruling, the dicastery also reversed the archdiocese's attempt to close and merge St. Richard Parish in Creve Coeur, Missouri. It is significant that the Vatican disputed the archdiocese's demographic projections and said St. Richard is "large enough to be a viable community," including 374 registered parishioners under 49-years-old "in their prime earning years."

A July 2020 Vatican instruction about parish reconfigurations specifically said a bishop should not merge a parish or sell a church because of "the lack of clergy, demographic decline or the grave financial state of the diocese." Yet until now it has been exceedingly rare for the Vatican to reverse a bishop on a parish merger. It is rarer still to see the Dicastery for the Clergy defend the viability of one smaller parish, let alone three of them. These rulings are good news for smaller — yet viable and vibrant — parishes that may pursue recourse in the future.

I have been helping with FutureChurch's Save Our Parish Community initiative since it launched in 2007. I lived through Cleveland's massive parish downsizing initiated by Cleveland's then-bishop, the late Richard Lennon, and saw firsthand how destructive the indiscriminate closing of smaller viable parishes can be — both to

the faith of Catholics and to the well-being of the poorer neighborhoods those parishes served. I rejoiced when 12 Cleveland parishes won their appeals, and the bishop was forced to reopen them after being closed for two or more years.

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I am so passionate about this issue that (spoiler alert) I spent three years writing a book about the late Sr. Kate Kuenstler's ground-breaking canonical work finding a pathway through canon law. Because of her creative contribution to new jurisprudence, Catholics now have a shot at due process when their bishop makes misguided decisions to merge their viable parishes and close their churches. If all goes as planned Rowman Littlefield will publish Bending Toward Justice: Sr. Kate Kuenstler and the Struggle for Parish Rights this coming December.

It is deeply gratifying to see Sister Kate's pioneering work bearing fruit. It is also gratifying to see faithful St. Louis Catholics organize to defend their parish homes.

In May 2023, after an 18 month "All Things New" planning process, the Archdiocese of St. Louis announced it would reduce the number of parishes from 178 to 135. Catholics opposed to restructuring had begun organizing months earlier. In April 2023 "Save Our St. Louis Parishes" sent a petition with 3,000 signatures asking Rozanski to halt restructuring plans altogether. Early feedback from laity apparently convinced the archdiocese to decrease the number of planned closures from 80-100 parishes to just 43.

"Save Our St. Louis Parishes" worked closely with canon lawyer Phillip Gray from the St. Joseph Foundation in submitting numerous appeals to Rome. Other appeals were submitted by other canon lawyers, including Robert Flummerfelt, who has guided numerous canonical recourses since Sister Kate's untimely death.

In an email to me, Flummerfelt found recent Vatican rulings in St. Louis to be a positive development: "The Holy See has generated strong jurisprudence on these matters positively affecting the rights of parishioners in retaining their parishes. It is encouraging to have those jurisprudential developments implemented and honored to respect the rights of the faithful in saving their parishes and churches."



The Cathedral Basilica for the Archdiocese of St. Louis is pictured in the city's Central West End neighborhood. (Wikimedia Commons/w_lemay)

It is commendable that Rozanski permitted some (but not all) parishes with Vatican appeals pending to remain open until a decision is rendered. To my knowledge this is the first time any prelate allowed parishes to remain in operation until the Vatican issued its rulings. It is also praiseworthy that the archdiocese's All Things New website made official decrees readily available, provided a glossary of canonical terms, provided information about the possibility of appeal and communicated regular updates about Vatican rulings.

As of February 2024, at least 16 St. Louis parish merger recourses had been submitted to Rome. According to the archdiocese, seven parish recourses are still pending.

After February's successful St. Richard ruling, Ken Battis, president of "Save Our St. Louis Parishes" told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "The lack of priestly resources is a real issue to be sure, but that has nothing to do with the parish itself." Furthermore,

Battis said, "You can't make one particular parish in one particular territory pay the price for your lack of vocations throughout the archdiocese."

Battis' sentiments were echoed by Sean McGroarty of St. Roch parish in an August 2023 interview with Our Sunday Visitor. McGroarty observed that the archdiocese's solution to the priest shortage of "simply moving priests to places where there are more Catholics," disproportionately impacted smaller parishes and those with greater minority populations. Allowing qualified laity to assume greater co-responsibility for parishes would help avert parish closings and mergers, he said. Unfortunately St. Roch's merger recourse was denied by Rome and parish leaders are still deciding on whether to appeal to the Apostolic Signatura, the church's highest court.

The priest shortage is a terrible reason to break up the vibrant, viable faith communities that are so important to evangelization. Yet the lack of priests continues to be a significant factor driving parish mergers and church closings. While not every St. Louis parish merger recourse was granted, at the end of the day it is remarkable that any of them were.

One can legitimately wonder if Rome is finally waking up.

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