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New Orleans Catholic church given reprieve

by Bruce Nolan by Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- Three years after they launched a desperate effort to save their Catholic parish from closure, members of historic St. Augustine Parish got official word Sunday (Mar. 1): They are off probation and back on solid ground.

Fr. Quentin Moody made the announcement at the conclusion of 10 a.m. Mass to a crowd of worshippers who interrupted his announcement with shouts and applause.

Among them were lay leaders who three years ago dug in their heels and resisted Archbishop Alfred Hughes' decision to close the wounded 168-year-old parish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The resistance morphed into a 20-day occupation of the St. Augustine rectory by young hurricane relief workers sympathetic to parishioners' pleas.

Hughes relented after a bitter public standoff. He told parishioners they had 18 months to stabilize the parish and meet certain ministry, finance and education benchmarks indicating parish vitality.

The old congregation in one of New Orleans' most historic neighborhoods is a cultural jewel. In its earliest days, white merchants, free black artisans and slaves worshipped there together.

The battle to save St. Augustine was in some ways a precursor to struggles by other parishes that would come two years later as the archdiocese continued its Katrina reorganization and closed other Catholic communities.

The fights to save two of those parishes, St. Henry and Our Lady of Good Counsel, also provoked physical occupations of buildings in late 2008 -- but this time the archdiocese held fast to its closure plan.

The parish today has about 510 families and is financially self-sufficient, Moody said. But he told parishioners the archdiocese will review its status in six months -- a more frequent inspection cycle than other parishes undergo.

"Look at this crowd," said parishioner Marge Paletou, who also fought for the parish three years ago. "This is where we really get to know one another. It's where stereotypes fall away. It's the way church is supposed to be."

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