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Cleveland: 52 fewer parishes in 15 months

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Come June 30, 2010, there will be 52 fewer parishes in the Cleveland Diocese.

Under a plan announced March 15 following a two-year planning process, Bishop Richard G. Lennon said 29 parishes will close and 41 others will merge to form 18 new parishes during the next 15 months.

The realignment will leave the country's 17th largest diocese with 172 parishes serving 753,000 Catholics across eight counties in northeastern Ohio.

All of the closings and mergers affect parishes in the diocese's urban cores -- Cleveland, Akron and Lorain -- and in several inner-ring suburbs. Some mergers involve parishes within blocks of each other.

Meeting with reporters, Lennon called the realignment "a very difficult but necessary step" to carry out the church's mission in northeast Ohio.

He cited the movement of Catholics from urban to outlying suburban and rural areas of the diocese, the declining number of priests in the diocese and faltering parish finances as reasons for the realignment. He said population shifts have resulted in two-thirds of Catholics in the diocese being served by one-third of the parishes.

Lennon said 42 percent of the diocese's 224 parishes are operating under financial deficits. He also said the diocese has 257 priests in active ministry today compared with 565 in 1970.

"Simply put, the church is being strained in its resources," he said. "We had to face reality and do something."

The population of the city of Cleveland has declined from more than 914,000 in 1950 to an estimated

405,000 according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Following a similar trend, the city's Catholic population has fallen from nearly 235,000 in 88 parishes to just under 90,000 in 65 parishes during the same period, diocesan records show. Meanwhile, the Catholic population in Cuyahoga County, where Cleveland is located, has more than tripled from 102,000 to 356,000 since 1950.

"As a result, some of these expanding areas have been underserved by the church, while areas that were previously densely populated by Catholics are no longer vibrant," Lennon said.

"The fact is, to be honest, the church is changing," he explained. "At the same time this really is the occasion for joy because, God willing, it will allow us to build a stronger church to make better use of our resources to achieve vibrancy for every parish throughout our diocese."

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The realignment will allow the Catholic Church to "continue to be present where we're really needed," he added.

Parishioners at several of the affected churches told local media they were preparing to appeal their closing or merger as far as the Vatican if necessary.

The assessment of diocesan parishes began in 2001, when then-Bishop Anthony M. Pilla introduced the Vibrant Parish Life process to plan for the diocese's future. Initially, the effort examined ways for parishes to collaborate in ministry as parish populations were changing.

The process gained momentum in 2007 when Lennon arranged parishes into clusters. One-third of the 69 clusters were instructed to develop plans for closings and mergers. The others were asked to develop plans for evangelizing, cooperating in ministries when possible and strengthening finances.

The closings and mergers do not include parish schools. Plans call for schools at several closing parishes to remain open. However, Lennon said he was meeting with officials from 13 Catholic schools on Cleveland's east side March 16 to look at ways to better meet the needs of students. Several schools are operating at about 50 percent of capacity even though they are operating in the black.

"It's just a tremendous burden running that many campuses," the bishop said. "It's not so much the number of buildings; it's the number of children that counts."

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