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Parish groups seek mediation on church closings

by Tom Roberts



New Orleans police officers take Our Lady of Good Counsel parishioner Hunter Harris into the squad car Jan. 6 after he refused to end a vigil inside the closed church. (CNS)

Catholics in eight U.S. dioceses who are fighting to keep their parishes open have asked the Vatican to suspend any actions to close churches as well as legal proceedings resulting from closings and to mandate mediation to solve the disputes.

Peter Borre, chair of the Council of Parishes, which describes itself as a support and advocacy group for Boston's Catholic parishes, hand delivered the "Request for Mediation" April 7 to the Vatican's Under-Secretary for Relations with States, a section with the Secretariat of State, on behalf of 31 parishioner groups in the dioceses of Boston, Allentown, Pa., Buffalo, Cleveland, New Orleans, Scranton, Pa., Springfield, Mass., and New York.

The 18-page request was submitted even as cases from the Boston parishes are making their way through the church's highest judicial system. But Borre said the legal route holds little chance of success. He said the group wanted to avoid a crisis if possible by seeking other options before the legal process was

completed.

The petition asks that the Vatican courts and congregations suspend reviews of appeals from American parishioners in the eight dioceses and that the Vatican instruct the bishops of those dioceses to suspend decrees regarding parish closings and refrain from making any new decrees "and to enter promptly into Vatican-mandated mediation."

The request describes mediation as "a last resort before a deeper crisis emerges," a situation in which, the group predicted, bishops would face either tolerating parishioners occupying churches around the clock for an unknown period or ordering police, as occurred in New Orleans, to remove parishioners. The petition also predicts that unless a third way is found, more people will leave the church or set up "neo-Catholic" communities with increasingly loose ties to the institution.

In Boston, Borre noted, four groups have occupied churches since October 2004 and a fifth has been occupied since May 2005, a demonstration that Borre termed the "broadest-based, longest-duration movement of peaceful resistance in the history of Catholic America." Four other churches had been occupied, but they were reopened by the archdiocese.

The "hundreds of vigilers" occupying the churches, the petition states, "are mainstream Catholics, with no agendas other than safeguarding their faith communities, and with no attachment to any 'neo' movements on either side of the ideological spectrum."

In an interview from Rome April 7, just after he delivered the request to the Secretariat of State, Borre said that someone "deeply involved in the system looked at this very methodically" and discovered that in all similar cases coming out of the United States in the past 40 years, "we could not come up with one parishioner appeal granted."

Currently there are nine appeals from the Boston area before the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's supreme court and highest tribunal for parishioner appeals. So far, the request states, all parishioner appeals "have been turned down administratively by the diocesan bishops and by the [Vatican] Congregation for the Clergy; and juridically by the Congregatio," a screening panel to decide which cases will be heard by the full Apostolic Signatura. The Signatura is headed by former St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke. The petition for mediation notes that Burke's "track record" of closing 23 parishes in St. Louis and 26 parishes in the La Crosse, Wis., diocese, where he was previously bishop, "is not encouraging precedent for Catholics who challenge parish closings."

The document cites the late Pope John Paul II's emphasis on the importance of parishes in a speech to U.S. bishops during their *ad limina* visit in 2004. The pope said the parish is 'preeminent among all the other communities in his diocese for which the bishop has primary responsibility. ? The diocese should always be understood as existing in and for its parishes."

In the interview with *NCR*, Borre said the intent of the petitioners is to place renewed emphasis on the parish as that central community in the diocese. The document also seeks clarity in the financial responsibilities of both parishes and dioceses and a renewed recognition of the "principle of subsidiarity in diocesan governance." Subsidiarity is a principle central to Catholic teaching that holds that decisions that can be made at a local level should not be passed on to larger entities.

Borre, who lived and was educated in Rome, has had careers in business and the military. He said he has made four trips to Rome in the last five months to confer with a church lawyer overseeing the legal cases and with sympathetic officials. All of them, he said, held little hope for a favorable legal outcome and advised him to seek relief "through policy."

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He emphasized that the request for mediation "does not ask for the moon. We're not asking them to stop, roll back or rescind; we're asking them to suspend, a temporary time-out" to undergo mediation and to see if the two sides can reach agreement.

The request for mediation "is intentionally vague," he said, and asks the church to "restore Catholic places of worship."

The petition was presented now, he said, because the group expects a final legal ruling sometime this spring. He said the petitioners wanted to seek a "third way" before bishops felt compelled to step in and forcibly remove people who are occupying churches around the clock.

Borre said those seeking mediation are "absolutely willing to look at financial realities."

"No institution, with the possible exception of the Boston Red Sox, is guaranteed eternal life," he said. "If we get to the promised land of mediation, we would be talking about Catholic faith communities, parishes that are self-sustaining and are positive contributors to the archdiocese financially."

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