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Vatican court upholds Massachusetts parish closures

by Catholic News Service

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. -- The Springfield Diocese has been informed that the Apostolic Signature, the Vatican's highest tribunal, has upheld the diocese's decision to suppress and close three parishes.

According to a Nov. 10 press release issued by the diocese, the upholding of the parish closings "is a definitive finding which supports the actions of the diocese, thus removing any possibility for their restoration as parishes."

The three parishes in the western Massachusetts diocese involved in the final ruling are: St. Stanislaus Kostka in Adams and St. George and St. Patrick in Chicopee. The decision affirmed merging St. Stanislaus Kostka with Pope John Paul the Great Parish, and St. George and St. Patrick with Holy Name of Jesus.

It also affirms a ruling made earlier this year by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy that upheld the parish mergers.

In the same action, the press release said, the Vatican court indicated the diocese had not yet provided sufficient cause to use the former churches for nonreligious uses, a similar point made by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy in its decision.

But the diocese said the court's secondary finding does not require that these church buildings be reopened, and does not mandate that they be restored as regular worship sites, since the parishes they were assigned to no longer exist.

"This action simply means they cannot be actively used for any nonreligious purpose. It allows for no use, or a wide range on other nonworship religious uses," the diocesan news release said.

The finding of the Apostolic Signature will be reviewed by diocesan canon lawyers, the release stated, and "discussions will take place with each of the successor parishes and their legitimate consultative bodies as to their recommendations on proceeding."

The release also said: "The diocese intends to pursue this matter following the suggestions given by the court and other options as provided in canon law. The concern of the diocese remains with regard to the resources needed to keep these and other facilities open. Even limited use might pose a tremendous financial strain on the successor parishes."

Future actions by the diocese may include using the clarification now provided by the Apostolic Signature to issue a decree stating "the need to reduce the status of the church buildings or alternative uses as permitted."

In layperson's terms, the decision of the Apostolic Signature means that the parishes named no longer exist but the church buildings "are still considered sacred sites," according to Msgr. John J. Bonzagni, director of the Springfield Diocese's Office of Pastoral Planning. Although the buildings cannot be sold or put to a nonreligious use, he said, they can be left empty or used for another sacred purpose, such as a mausoleum.

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The recent decision also means "this is not over yet," said Msgr. Bonzagni, as the diocese is pursuing additional canonical options.

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