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Vatican congregation says 13 Cleveland parishes must reopen

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service



A sign that reads "Rome has spoken. We will reopen" is seen among gravestones in the cemetery outside St. Patrick Church in Cleveland. The church, closed in 2010, was among 27 shuttered in a reconfiguration plan under Bishop Richard G. Lennon. (CNS photo/William Rieter)

CLEVELAND -- A Vatican congregation has overturned the closing of 13 parishes in the Diocese of Cleveland and said the churches must be restored for worship, a person involved with the cases said.

The ruling reverses some of the closings ordered by Bishop Richard G. Lennon since 2009 under a diocesan-wide reconfiguration plan.

The Congregation for Clergy's ruling in support of parishioners who appealed the closings is a rare instance, explained Peter Borre, a leader with the Council of Parishes in Boston, who has been advising parish groups nationwide on their appeals.

Lennon can appeal the rulings to the Apostolic Signature, the Vatican's highest court.

The decrees have not been made public. However, Borre told Catholic News Service on Thursday they cited Canon 515 and the procedural and substantive steps that were not followed under it.

Canon 515 governs the responsibilities of a bishop regarding the opening or closing of a parish.

Borre said he was able to read one of the congregation's documents and had others read to him by people familiar with the cases. In each decree, he said, the language was identical with only the name of the appealing parish changing.

The group Endangered Catholics, which has been working to reverse the closings since 2009, called a news conference for Thursday afternoon to release a copy of one of the decrees and discuss their hopes for reopening parishes as soon as possible.

A diocesan spokesman said the documents from the congregation had not been received as of Thursday morning.

Robert Tayek, director of media and public relations, told Catholic News Service he mistakenly believed that a package with the decrees had arrived at diocesan offices Wednesday. They were not in that package, he said.

"The Diocese of Cleveland is awaiting official word from the Vatican concerning any decrees," Tayek said, reading from a prepared statement. "We first must see the official documents in order to review them and understand what exactly is being said; only then can a response be determined."

The Vatican's decision was met with jubilation, prayers of thanksgiving and song as parishioners gathered to celebrate outside of several of the closed churches in the hours after they learned of the rulings Wednesday.

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"We're as stunned as anybody," said Bob Kloos, a leader in the group Endangered Catholics and a member of the Community of St. Peter, which was formed by parishioners of the closed St. Peter Church who created a nonprofit corporation to stay together as a Catholic worship community and continue various ministries in Cleveland's inner city.

Fr. Robert Marrone joined the effort and continues as the community's pastor despite a warning of excommunication from Lennon.

"We are overjoyed," Kloos said. "We are looking forward to working collaboratively and in mutual respect with the bishop to reopen these parishes."

He said that he hopes the ruling will help lift "the pall that's been afflicting the diocese" since the closings were announced.

Nancy McGrath, co-chair of Code Purple, a church reform group in Akron, said the diocese is faced with rebuilding parish communities to ensure they remain vibrant and financially stable.

"I think the people from Cleveland made their case very carefully and very clearly that these churches never had to close," McGrath said.

"The important point now is for all 13 to work together to help each other, to share ideas, and to share resources," she said.

The parishes were among 27 closed under a reconfiguration plan announced by Lennon in 2009. Another 41 were merged to form 18 new parishes. Most were in urban areas and many were founded to serve European immigrants.

The plan was devised after a years-long process that saw parishioners clustered together to discuss how to maintain ministries in designated areas and ultimately suggested to Bishop Lennon which parishes might close. In some cases, Lennon followed the recommendations; in others he decided to close some parishes that were not targeted for closing by the cluster groups, upsetting many involved in the process.

Some closures met were met with sit-ins and prayer vigils. At St. Casimir Parish, a church serving the Polish community on Cleveland's east side, parishioners have gathered outside every Sunday to pray and read Scripture since November 2009.

Lennon has 60 days to appeal the congregation's decisions to the Apostolic Signature once he receives the decrees. He can also file a motion with the Congregation for Clergy for reconsideration.

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