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Cleveland priests doubt Lennon's leadership, call for removal

by Brian Roewe



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Pope Benedict XVI greets Bishop Richard G. Lennon of Cleveland during a Feb. 2 meeting with U.S. bishops on their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican. (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

The recent decision of Cleveland bishop Richard G. Lennon to eliminate his diocese's pastoral planning office appears to have been the final straw, atop a growing list of grievances, for some of his priests.

Since the office's closing and concurrent firing of two long-time and respected employees, several priests have written letters to Lennon's superiors in the United States and in Rome, voicing a lack confidence in his leadership and requesting his removal.

The letters surfaced even as Lennon is engaged in the early stages of restoring 11 parishes, carrying out an order from Rome that reversed his earlier decision to shutter the churches. The bishop said in a May 23 meeting with the Cleveland Plain Dealer's editorial board he hopes to begin reopening parishes by mid-June and complete the process by Aug. 1, the newspaper reported.

Obtained by *NCR* Thursday morning, the letters from three priests — whose names and respective parishes were blacked out — call for Lennon's removal as their bishop, and express their waning confidence in his ability to lead the diocese.

"I write to you with a heavy heart to say that it is time for our Bishop, Richard Lennon, to move on," wrote one priest in a letter dated May 7 to Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the Congregation for the

Clergy.

Lennon, aware of the growing disconnect between himself and the presbyterate, wrote to all diocesan priests May 21, saying "I am writing to assure you of my desire to remedy this situation."

The letter announces a series of nine, two-hour small group gatherings for the bishop and priests to be held between June 7 and July 2. "I will come to these meetings eager to hear your suggestions for improving our relationship. I will listen with an open heart," Lennon wrote.

The priest, in his letter to Piacenza, acknowledged Lennon's positive qualities "good one-on-one, skilled in fundraising" but said that the "pain and damage caused by the merging and closing of churches" calls for new leadership, even if they had occurred under "the best of bishops."

He added that the congregation's decrees overturning Lennon's attempted shuttering of the 11 churches were interpreted as a vote of no confidence by Rome, and ultimately says it is time for Lennon to leave Cleveland.

"Cardinal Piacenza, there is no joy in Cleveland. Ministry has become a burden for so many of us. We live in fear of retaliation if we are vocal. Desperation has pushed me to a point beyond fear. Please help," his letter concludes.

In a second letter, addressed to the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the priest "who identifies himself as a pastor of a merged parish that included one of the 11 appealing parishes" expands on the effect of the elimination of the pastoral planning office.

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"Pastorally my parish is in turmoil," he wrote. "The only diocesan office to contact us about our status was the Pastoral Planning Office. That office was decimated by Bishop Lennon last week and two of the diocese's most dedicated and loyal employees were simply let go after years of faithful service."

Little more than a week after announcing his decision not to appeal the congregation's ruling, Lennon dissolved the pastoral planning office, firing with three days notice David DeLambo and Rick Krivanka, two longtime employees with the diocese with extensive knowledge of a majority of the parishes in the diocese.

Lennon said budget constraints forced him to close the office which was largely responsible for helping parishes grow and in developing a sense of pride and ownership among parishioners in their parish's health.

For merging or reopening parishes, the office assisted them in cultivating a spirit of unity and belonging, as well as helped shaped a plan for future growth and stability.

A recent success story for the office's work is found at St. Colman parish, once slated for closure itself. Upon fighting to keep his church open, Fr. Bob Begin worked with the pastoral planning office on a plan that eventually doubled the church's weekend worshipping families, and doubled its collection and outreach workers, as well as welcomed 16 new Catholics this Holy Saturday.

In his letter, the priest quotes a fellow pastor who described the office as having "the institutional memory and the competence to help for effective strategic planning. The feelings of dismay and outrage at this

latest senseless move on the part of Bishop Lennon only serve to fuel the flames of distrust and suspicion that make it more and more difficult to see how he can ever be an effective leader in this diocese.?

?With all due respect and before imminent chaos in the diocese erupts, I ask you to ask our Holy Father to have Bishop Lennon removed as Bishop of Cleveland,? his letter concludes.

A second priest ? writing to Piacenza, Viganò and also Bishop Emeritus John M. Smith of Trenton, N.J., the apostolic visitor to Cleveland in 2011 ? shared in the first?s frustration of the pastoral planning office?s closing and its impact on the success of the reopening parishes.

In his letter to Piacenza, the priest accuses Lennon of ?going through the motions of reopening the churches/parishes as you have decreed,? and that the closing of the office demonstrates he is managing the reopenings in a way to guarantee the parishes? failure.

He further stated that those employed in the planning office alone had the expertise to guide the 11 parishes? restorations, due to their long history within the diocese and past success in working with other parishes, including the letter-writing priest?s own.

?In fact there is no plan to supply the professional services that are necessary to fulfill your decree in any meaningful way,? he wrote. ?The plan is rather to assure that no effective assistance will be available. The perception is that the closing of this office is both punitive and strategic.?

In his letter to Smith, who visited Cleveland in 2011 at Lennon?s request to investigate his leadership in the wake of the mass closings and mergers, the priest summed up his perception of the scene in Cleveland:

?There is more distrust than ever and the opinion of almost everyone I talk to from the churches that have won their appeals is that the Bishop is going to ?set them up for failure.? ? please register my voice as one that thinks that it would be better for all if this Bishop were removed.?

That priests are writing letters is a significant development, said Fr. Donald Cozzens, a retired priest who teaches at John Carroll University, in University Heights, Ohio.

?It takes a certain amount of moral courage for a priest to do that,? he said, indicating that a priest risks a lot by taking such action.

Cozzens said that the role the priests play in the coming months in Cleveland will be critical, given their role not only as leaders at the parish level, but as ?collaborators with the bishop in the overall mission of the diocese.?

?And I think it?s fair to say a number of Cleveland priests do not have confidence that there is the kind of cooperation needed today between our bishop, the priests of the diocese and the laity of the diocese,? he said, pointing to the bishop?s initial handling of the parish closings and the closing of the pastoral planning office.

The revelation of the priests? letters follows the filing of a motion in Rome by St. Patrick parish, requesting the congregation to urge Lennon to enact their decree within 15 days.

If he failed to reopen the West Park church in that timeframe, the motion requests an outside body to do so, specifically Viganò, Smith or the Metropolitan bishop (Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati).

Peter Borre, an advocate for several parishes, said the move was intended to ?take this out of the hands of

Lennon, and find somebody's who's hierarchically superior who will in fact implement what these decrees are all about, the restoration of the parishes, the reopening of the parochial churches.?

Another letter, authored by a retired priest ?in good standing? with the diocese, told Viganò of a priest recently ?fired? by Lennon. Upset with his handling of parish finances, the bishop ordered the priest to resign immediately from his parish, but not before writing out his resignation in longhand.

Since then, the priest has been reassigned as a parochial vicar of another parish, but has been provided no office, phone or computer. He was unable to claim all of his belongings before his former rectory's locks were changed, and has been provided no arrangements for meals.

?In the Cleveland Diocese our priests and deacons have been, and still are, bullied and ill treated,? wrote the retired priest. Many fear retaliation if they criticize or question the bishop.

?Priestly morale is decimated,? one priest wrote to Piacenza. ?Our presbyteral council meeting of April 27 was nearly ended in fisticuffs between the clergy and the bishop.?

?We pray for our bishop every day at Mass,? the priest wrote. ?I cannot imagine him being happy here under these circumstances. ? I am convinced that unity can only come about with a fresh start at the top. It would give him and us peace, as well.?

?The folks are hurting. The priests are hurting,? the retired priest wrote. ?Things seem to be so bad that not even the bishop can do anything to make them better, because he is hurting, too. Perhaps it is time for a parting of the ways, hopefully with honor and peace, and an opportunity for healing and forgiveness. Right now there is something wrong here.?

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* Bertelsen intern. His e-mail address is broewe@ncronline.org.]

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