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Church officials try to retake New Orleans parishes

by Bruce Nolan

NEW ORLEANS -- Officials from the Archdiocese of New Orleans on Monday (Jan. 5) again visited two shuttered churches that are occupied by people protesting their closure, but left with protesters still in possession of the buildings as their standoff entered its 10th week.

Shortly after noon, archdiocesan staffers visited St. Henry Church and nearby Our Lady of Good Counsel bent on "routine inspections" of the properties, archdiocesan spokeswoman Sarah Comiskey said.

She and parishioners concurred that the staffers tried to enter Good Counsel, but were denied access by those inside. They briefly entered St. Henry, made a quick inspection and left, Comiskey and parishioners said. As a result, occupiers said they have reversed a former custom and now keep the doors closed and locked.

Although the day ended as it began, the visits only further heightened occupiers' wariness after church officials, in a sudden shift from a hands-off approach, entered the two churches Saturday night, awakened sleeping occupiers and asked them to leave.

St. Henry's occupiers refused; whether all occupiers left Good Counsel remained a matter of dispute.

Harold Baquet, a Good Counsel parishioner, said an occupier there remained behind in hiding to repossess the church after the archdiocese officials left; Comiskey cautioned against accepting that version, but declined to elaborate. Good Counsel, meanwhile, remains in parishioners' hands.

Comiskey acknowledged Monday that after weeks of allowing parishioners and supporters to hold the buildings, the archdiocese hoped to finesse an end to the occupations with a surprise appearance in the middle of the night without media or police, hoping to encounter two or three parishioners who could be persuaded to leave.

Comiskey said Archbishop Alfred Hughes wants an end to the occupations -- parishioners call them vigils -- so that nearby Good Shepherd parish, into which the two occupied parishes have been merged, can get past its birth pangs and realize its full potential.

Hughes and Comiskey also cited other reasons for their change in concern, among them reports that children had spent the night inside the churches and that people were exercising in the buildings.

That apparently referred to some occupiers' walking laps around interiors during their two- and four-hour shifts -- as well as to "reports of people bringing yoga mats, things like that," Comiskey said. The archdiocese believes either is inappropriate.

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