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Cleveland Catholics ask Vatican to oversee their bishop

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Sep. 28, 2009

Bishop Richard Lennon (CNS 2006 file photo)

CLEVELAND -- Catholics protesting Cleveland Bishop Richard Lennon's plan to close 50 churches are asking the Vatican to oversee Lennon's actions.

Separately, at least three Cleveland churches [1] received letters from the Vatican last week (Sept. 20-26), saying their appeals of Lennon's orders to close are being reviewed.

Some parishioners from the three churches are members of the protest group Endangered Catholics, which is seeking the oversight of Lennon.

The request for oversight is in accordance with church law but is rarely exercised, said Catholic activist Peter Borre of Boston, who will file the complaint in Rome on behalf of the Cleveland group.

Borre, who has been fighting church closings nationwide, said the law allows for the appointment of a supervising bishop when the diocesan bishop is seen as incompetent.

Endangered Catholics, which represents 14 parishes in the eight-county diocese of Cleveland, says Lennon "has proceeded recklessly" in his downsizing plan.

In its complaint to the Vatican's Congregation of Bishops, the group says that Lennon closed viable parishes without explanation and at times acted against the recommendations of cluster committees, grass-roots groups he convened for advice.

"Bishop Lennon's failures in our diocese are a clear and present danger to many thousands of Catholics who are strongly attached to the vibrant parishes which face imminent destruction for no valid reason," the complaint says.

The complaint to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re is to be filed along with 5,000 petition signatures from Cleveland-area Catholics and non-Catholics opposed to the church closings.

Diocese spokesman Robert Tayek said Wednesday that the bishop had not received the complaint, but Tayek

issued a statement from Lennon.

"It is my prayer that these members of our diocese will take the time and exercise prayerful patience to better understand what our clustering and reconfiguration plan is designed to achieve," the bishop said, adding that the church will become "stronger and more vibrant."

"I believe they will find that the process for reconfiguring the diocese ... will be accomplished within the proper canonical procedures of the church."

A Vatican body known as the Congregation for the Clergy determines whether church law was followed in the closing process.

It was that body that sent the letters to the three churches this week, saying it needed more time to review the cases and extending the deadline for doing so to Dec. 9.

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