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NOLA archbp meets with disaffected Catholics

by Bruce Nolan by Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- Newly installed Archbishop Gregory Aymond has been in quiet talks with a city pastor and representatives of two closed parishes in hopes of healing a bitter rift that erupted last year over a downsizing plan.

Parishioners, meanwhile, hope the dialogue may also produce a compromise on the occasional reopening of their churches. After two sessions, no decision is near.

Aymond and the parishioners appear to be trying to first begin repairing the breach between them before embarking on substantive discussions about whether the two parishes, St. Henry and Our Lady of Good Counsel, might occasionally reopen for services.

The two historic parishes were closed last autumn in a broad reorganization of worship in the Archdiocese of New Orleans that touched nearly three dozen other parishes as well.

Parishioners at St. Henry and Good Counsel resisted fiercely and, in a bitter public dispute, occupied their churches for more than two months before being forced out by police in January.

The protestors have appealed the closings to Aymond, who succeeded Archbishop Alfred Hughes in August.

To underscore their efforts toward reconciliation, Aymond and parish leaders have agreed to make little or no public comment, hoping to dial down the tension that for months surrounded the parish closings.

Alden Hagardorn, a leader of the resistance at St. Henry, and others characterized the talks as the beginning of an effort at reconciliation.

"What this does, it tells parishioners and the rest of the archdiocese that we can communicate, even though we're on opposite ends," Hagardorn said. "Bridges are getting built, which we didn't have in the past."

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