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Cleveland church gets international help

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Feb. 22, 2010

CLEVELAND -- Former presidential candidate Rep. Dennis Kucinich, joining a battle to save a Hungarian Catholic church from closure, has brought out a big gun: the Hungarian government.

Kucinich met with an aide to Hungarian Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai to discuss St. Emeric church, a 105-year-old parish that has been ordered closed as part of a downsizing plan by the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

The meeting was a follow-up to a meeting Kucinich had with the prime minister in December, when the congressman urged the Hungarian government to appeal St. Emeric's closing to the Vatican in Rome.

The aide, David Koranyi, told Kucinich that the government has appealed.

?It shows that our community has an international reach,? said Kucinich, a Democrat, who described St. Emeric as a ?spiritual and cultural treasure.?

The ethnic church, which has more than 600 registered members, is one of 50 casualties in the ongoing downsizing plan. Bishop Richard Lennon has decreed that St. Emeric's will be shuttered June 30.

Lennon has already closed one Hungarian parish, though he plans to keep another one open. ?I recognize how difficult it may be for the parishioners ... to leave their parishes,? Lennon wrote to the churches' pastors last March.

Bela Szombati, the Hungarian ambassador to the U.S., told The Plain Dealer Feb. 18 that Bajnai sent his appeal letter to Rome in December, shortly after meeting with Kucinich. Szombati said the government has not yet received a response.

?We understand the difficulties of the Catholic church, but this church, St. Emeric, is of special significance to the Hungarian community in Cleveland,? Szombati said by telephone from his embassy in Washington. ?It's a significant place of worship and a significant place of gathering for Hungarians.?

A spokesman for the Cleveland diocese said it had not heard of the Hungarian government's appeal and had no immediate comment.

Kucinich has already proposed that the city seize closed churches by eminent domain, saying ?The deeds of title to the churches belong to the Diocese of Cleveland, but the rich cultural, ethnic and religious history belongs to the people of Cleveland.?

[Michael O'Malley writes for The Plain Dealer of Cleveland.]

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