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St. Louis Polish parish rejects archdiocese's proposal

Joseph Kenny Catholic News Service | Aug. 24, 2010

People receive Communion during Mass at St. Agatha Church in St. Louis Aug. 10. Polish Catholics in St. Louis are hopeful that the dispute over the closing of nearby St. Stanislaus Church can soon be resolved. (CNS photo)

ST. LOUIS -- While efforts continue to re-establish St. Stanislaus as a Catholic parish, the Polish Catholics in the archdiocese who gather at St. Agatha Church in South St. Louis keep a watchful eye.

"The group is faithful. They follow the church, the archbishop, the pope and most of all Jesus," said Fr. Czeslaw Litak, a Polish native who is pastor of St. Agatha.

St. Stanislaus had served Catholics of Polish heritage but is no longer operating as a Catholic parish. In August 2004, then-St. Louis Archbishop Raymond L. Burke temporarily moved pastoral care of Catholics of Polish heritage from St. Stanislaus after the lay board there claimed control over parish finances and denied the archbishop's request to bring the corporate structure of the parish into compliance with church law. The apostolate then was moved to St. Agatha, pending a resolution of the St. Stanislaus conflict.

The St. Stanislaus property is owned by a civil corporation, and the original articles of agreement and paperwork forming the Polish Roman Catholic St. Stanislaus Corporation state that among its purposes is to operate a Polish Roman Catholic church.

Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis has met with the board of directors of St. Stanislaus on ways to re-establish the parish while at the same time addressing the fears expressed by some parishioners that the parish would be closed and its property sold with the proceeds being used for other purposes within the archdiocese.

They developed a concept of the present corporation continuing to own the parish property and the cash and securities that it holds while leasing, without charge, the parish church and rectory to a new parish corporation founded on the model of others in the archdiocese, of which the pastor would be the president. Among other points, the adjoining Polish Heritage Center would not be leased, but would be available without charge for all parish functions.

If the parish were ever closed in the future by an archbishop, the parish property would continue to be owned by

the St. Stanislaus Corporation and used for Polish Catholic religious and charitable purposes.

Ed Florek, a St. Stanislaus parishioner for some 33 years since coming from Poland, had been part of the board that disagreed with the archdiocese over the restructuring. But he stopped going to St. Stanislaus, which had hired a pastor who was later excommunicated. Florek had said he believed the parish was being led away from Catholicism.

Florek said he now attends St. Joan of Arc and another Southside parish, "and I visit St. Agatha just to support them."

A nonbinding vote in early August by St. Stanislaus parishioners turning down the potential agreement is "a very sad story," Florek said, in part because the St. Agatha members who once were faithful St. Stanislaus members "were disenfranchised. If even some of them had been able to vote, we would have won the vote. The difference was only 72 votes."

After the vote, Archbishop Carlson said in a statement that he was disappointed with the outcome. "Since coming to the Archdiocese of St. Louis, I have sought ways to bring about reconciliation," he said. "I remain committed to working toward a resolution."

Other Polish Catholics who formerly were members of St. Stanislaus attend their neighborhood churches today, Florek said, and also were nonvoters.

"They cannot use the church which they helped to build. These are people who spent 50, 60, 70 years in the church. The new generation of people there, it's hard to estimate, but more than half are not even Polish or even if they have some Polish heritage, they have only been parishioners, three, four, five years at most."

The spiritual guidance at St. Stanislaus should be from the Catholic Church, he added. The church is losing its ethnic flavor, culture and heritage, he said, and "this is sad for all the Polish people."

Joseph Skudrzyk, parish council president at St. Agatha, said the parishioners went to St. Agatha because they did not agree with the St. Stanislaus board and wanted to remain Catholic. He believes they should have a voice in the fate of St. Stanislaus.

He also said the Polish Heritage Center should support the church. He is a member of the center's original building committee.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI dismissed from the clerical state the suspended priest of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Marek Bozek, who had been hired by the St. Stanislaus Corporation to be pastor.

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