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'No parish is safe'

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Canon 515, which gives a bishop unfettered power in determining which parishes to erect and which to suppress, was cited recently by the Vatican?s Supreme Court in its ruling that Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston correctly followed church procedures in closing parishes. The ruling was delivered in appeals by 10 parishes in Boston that had been closed.

In explaining the ruling and some of its implications, a Catholic News Service story quoted Peter Borre of the Boston-based Council of Parishes, a group formed to help Catholics defend their parishes. Borre told CNS that, after consulting with a canonist in Rome, he believes the recent decrees essentially mean that ?no parish is safe.?

?The decision means ... now the center of gravity [in the church] becomes the diocese, not the parish,? he said. ?The parishes become expendable.?

Borre?s insight is both on target and chilling. One need only look at a situation like that in the Cleveland diocese (see story [1]) to realize the implications of the use of that canon. In Cleveland, Bishop Richard Lennon imposed a plan on the diocese -- which had been considering a more modest realignment under his predecessor -- that closed 27 parishes and merged 41 others into 18 parishes.

The realignment was in part the result of financial difficulties, but at least as much occasioned by a priest shortage. Lennon was determined that each parish would have a priest.

The question that looms over such a strategy, of course, is what happens as the number of priests continues to decline? And if the parish is now expendable and the diocese becomes the locus of the church, can we expect parishes to keep becoming larger and larger -- the sense and needs of the people be damned -- so that each has a priest?

A number of parishes in the Cleveland diocese have appealed to Rome and they expect decisions later this year. In light of recent rulings, however, no one expects Rome to rule in the petitioners? favor.

While the prerogatives here may be clear in canon law, the reality on the ground is that people -- those who constitute the church and are the reasons, after all, for parishes -- live in continued uncertainty. Do their efforts at building community and being a presence in a given location have any meaning, or are their efforts expendable depending on the condition of the clergy culture in a certain spot on the map?

What is most important in this strategy? Preserving the eucharistic community or preserving at all costs, including the life of the community, an all-male celibate clergy?

The questions emanating from these decisions are not insignificant for the future of the church.

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/19966