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Cleveland bishop to mull parish reopenings while celebrations go ahead

Brian Roewe | Mar. 15, 2012

A week after news broke about their content, the decrees from the Vatican's Congregation of the Clergy regarding appeals by 13 shuttered Cleveland parishes have arrived at the diocese and Bishop Richard G. Lennon has received them.

In a brief statement released Wednesday through the diocesan website, Lennon acknowledged receiving the decrees from the congregation and said he will now begin reviewing their rulings with his advisers.

Lennon has 60 days to determine if he wishes to appeal the congregation's decision to overrule his closing of 13 churches and suppressing their parishes. The appeal process would go through the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican's Supreme Court.

Regardless of what Lennon decides to do, those sided with the parishes want Lennon to reopen their churches immediately, in accordance with the decrees.

"[An appeal is] within his right," said Peter Borre, an adviser to the parishes. "However, the status quo now canonically is that these 13 things are Catholic parishes, and the 13 padlocked buildings are parochial churches with full standing.

"He can go to the Signatura and tie himself up in knots for the next year, but we will demand that the congregation's order be executed now, so that while this appeal grinds on in Rome for a year or so, these are functioning parishes and the churches are opened for ordinary Catholic worship."

Beginning in August 2009, Lennon closed 50 churches through mergers and shutdowns in a downsizing process across the eight-county diocese. The last church shut its doors in June 2010. Unveiling the plan in March 2009, Lennon, a former auxiliary bishop in the Boston archdiocese, cited demographic shifts, a shortage of priests and financial troubles as the rationale for his decision.

Borre, a leader with the Boston-based Council of Parishes, said he would advise the appealing parishes to wait days, not weeks, for a response from Lennon, before taking further action.

If Lennon delays too long, the parishes could send him a letter requesting compliance with the decrees, and if he fails to respond to that, they could seek to file emergency motions in Rome to force the bishop's compliance with the decrees.

Signed by the prefect of the congregation, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, the decrees -- several of which were obtained last week by *NCR* -- state Lennon erred both procedurally (*de procedendo*) and substantively (*de decernendo*) in the suppression of the parishes and closing of their churches.

The decrees close with Piacenza writing, "The Bishop of Cleveland is instructed to enact the implications of this

Decree."

Members of St. Patrick Church, one of the successful appealing parishes, had hoped Lennon would reopen their church in time for the feast of St. Patrick on Saturday.

"St. Pat's parishioners and the West Park community are very hopeful and anxiously await that our church doors will be reopened and our parish restored in the near future based on the recent decree from the Congregation for the Clergy (Vatican)," said Patricia Schulte-Singleton, a member of St. Patrick and leader of the advocacy group Endangered Catholics, in a press release.

If the doors don't open in time, the parishioners plan to move forward with their celebration. Members of the parish plan to meet at the church Friday for an evening prayer service, during which luminaries symbolizing their continued vigilance for their parish's restoration will be placed on the church's steps.

On St. Patrick's Day, another prayer service is scheduled for the morning near the St. Patrick statue outside their still-shuttered church. Afterward, many, along with members of other parishes, will march in the city's St. Patrick's Day parade.

Others have targeted Holy Week for the reopening of all 13 parishes.

"If these churches are not physically reopened and in good shape as we approach Palm Sunday, then we will know Lennon's true colors," Borre told *NCR* on March 9.

"And we will be engaged in another campaign. And having had the steadfastness to fight him for the last three years, now that we enjoy the support of a Rome decree, we will continue this fight."

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