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Appealing Cleveland parishes receive new pastors

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Parishioners from several closed Cleveland parishes and their supporters celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving at St. Coleman church March 25. Bishop Richard G. Lennon announced new pastors for five of the 11 parishes that successfully appealed to the Vatican to reopen. (CNS photo/William Rieter)

Full restoration continues to inch closer for 11 shuttered parishes in Cleveland.

Bishop Richard G. Lennon announced Wednesday afternoon the names of pastors and opening dates for five of the 11 parishes that successfully appealed their closure to the Vatican?s Congregation for the Clergy in early March. A 12th parish required restoration in name only.

The new pastors and assignments are:

- Rev. Gary Chmura, St. Adalbert parish in Cleveland, effective July 2;
- Rev. A. Jonathon Zingales, St. John the Baptist parish in Akron, effective July 2;
- Rev. Eric Orzech, St. Casimir parish in Cleveland, effective July 9;
- Rev. Joseph Hilinski, St. Barbara parish in Cleveland, effective July 16;
- Rev. Joseph Workman, St. James parish in Lakewood, effective July 23.

Assignments for the remaining six parishes are forthcoming, according to a diocesan statement. Each priest will determine the date for the opening Mass at their new parish homes, though a source told *NCR* the first Mass at St. Barbara is expected to be celebrated July 22 at 11 a.m.

Of the five newly assigned priests, only Hilinski will serve a single parish, as the other four will continue as pastors at their current parishes while taking on their new assignments.

Lennon said in late May he hoped to have all 11 churches opened by Aug. 1.

?Please join me in rejoicing with our brothers and sisters in faith during this blessed moment and pray for the success of these parishes in their mission to bring greater glory to God,? the Cleveland bishop said in the statement.

Local media filed into St. Barbara Church in Cleveland June 26 to document workers wiping away dust and returning religious artifacts to their places inside the once-shuttered building.

In its decrees, the Congregation for the Clergy ruled Lennon had erred procedurally and substantively when

suppressing the parishes beginning in March 2009.

Despite the positive development of Lennon naming pastors for five parishes, skepticism remains. Many parishioners at St. Barbara learned of their church?s cleaning not from their bishop but from media coverage. Others worry Lennon will assign a part-time pastor, despite each parish having its own priest prior to closing.

?I think most of our parishioner groups were hoping there would be constant communication,? said Patricia Schulte-Singleton, leader of the parish coalition group Endangered Catholics.

She stated that Endangered Catholics stands by its June 7 statement of allegiance with several diocesan priests who wrote letters to the Vatican and hierarchical authorities in the U.S. expressing their doubt in Lennon's ability to lead the diocese. Each priest also called for Lennon's removal.

?We do support our priests, if they believe that this is not working out with our bishop, as far as leadership,? Schulte-Singleton told *NCR*.

?[Lennon is] doing a good effort in trying to reconcile some things, but I think the jury?s still out if he can really mend the diocese with his leadership,? she said.

Schulte-Singleton said that while parishioners for the most part are excited and anxious to see their churches reopened after three years of waiting, there could be continued objection if Lennon does not follow the decrees completely. That will be the case with her parish, St. Patrick in West Park, she said.

?We will take nothing less than a full-time pastor assigned, and we fully intend on pressing full restoration as the way the decree is written, for however long it takes,? she said.

Diocesan spokesman Robert Tayek told the Cleveland Plain Dealer June 26 that once the parishes are restored, it will fall upon the parishioners to keep their churches open and vibrant. Schulte-Singleton agreed, but said that in the initial phases of restoration, ?we are going to need diocesan support.?

That means continued dialogue, cooperation and understanding, she said. Reflecting on the announcement of pastor assignments, Schulte-Singleton called them a positive feeling needed after several weeks of silence and uncertainty.

?It looks positive as far as getting back into the church and coming together as a parish family, and having Mass, and having the sacraments, but as far as some of the more specifics, that I don?t know yet,? she said.

?We?re so close, but so far.?

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