NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

New Orleans Catholics ask pope for new archbishop

Dennis Coday | Feb. 3, 2009

NEW ORLEANS -- A group of New Orleans Catholics has asked Pope Benedict XVI to name a successor to Archbishop Alfred Hughes "at the earliest practical time" over Hughes' management of the archdiocese after Hurricane Katrina.

Peter Borre, founder of a national Catholic group called the Coalition of Parishes, said he delivered a package of petitions and other documents to an American cleric at the Congregation for Bishops, the Vatican department that assists the pope in the selection of bishops worldwide, on Friday (Jan. 30).

The coalition grew out of angry parishioners' determination to resist bishops' closure of their parishes in Boston; Camden, N.J.; Toledo, Ohio; and other cities.

Borre, who is based in Boston, said by e-mail that he made the delivery to an American monsignor and briefly described their contents and context, but didn't have a substantive discussion.

Besides the petition, the package included a DVD with video of New Orleans police clearing parishioners, including three in handcuffs, from a shuttered Catholic parish on Jan. 6.

The papal petition is parishioners' latest attempt to keep their historic churches open, even if only as occasional sites for celebration of the sacraments. Two parishes mounted earlier, unsuccessful internal legal appeals to the Vatican.

The direct approach to Benedict addresses an institutional culture different from any in American civil life.

"In general, the Vatican loathes giving the appearance that it is bending to pressure," said the Rev. Tom Reese, a Jesuit political scientist and author of "Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church."

Local bishops are trusted to make pastoral decisions they think appropriate, without micromanagement from the Vatican, Reese said.

"On the other hand, the size of a petition could get the Vatican's attention," Reese said. "Even if it does not publicly act, widespread complaints would get the Vatican to start asking questions and talking to the bishop."

Borre said the New Orleans petition contained about 470 signatures; there are about 385,000 Catholics in the archdiocese.

In 2007, Hughes agreed to a Vatican request to remain in office past the nominal retirement age of 75. The expectation then was that the extension might last two years.

New Orleans parishioners disaffected by his leadership are asking the Vatican to hurry a successor. Archdiocesan spokeswoman Sarah Comiskey said the decision when to replace Hughes, and with whom, rests

with Benedict alone.

"Archbishop Hughes has faithfully served the Archdiocese of New Orleans beyond retirement age at the specific request of the Holy See," Comiskey said.

"When the time comes, and the Holy Father is ready to appoint a new archbishop, Archbishop Hughes will seek to continue his service to the Church in a less public ministry and support the new archbishop of New Orleans in any way he can."

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