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

Last of shuttered Cleveland parishes reopens after winning Vatican appeal

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Nov. 5, 2012
Cleveland

Hundreds gathered Sunday to celebrate the reopening of St. Emeric Catholic Church, a Hungarian parish that was shuttered two and a half years ago and is the last of 11 churches to reopen under orders from the Vatican.

For the first time in 28 months, St. Emeric came alive in a glow of candles and surges of Hungarian prayers and hymns. Many in the standing-room-only crowd held up cellphone cameras to capture the historic day.

"I can't speak," said Irma Friedrich, a parishioner since 1957. "I start to cry."

When St. Emeric closed June 30, 2010, many parishioners moved to St. Colman Catholic Church where its pastor, Fr. Bob Begin, learned to say Mass in Hungarian.

Fr. Sandor Siklodi, who had been pastor of St. Emeric for 25 years before it closed, was transferred to Chicago, but kept in touch with his Cleveland flock, hoping he would someday return.

On Sunday, Siklodi was joined on the altar by Begin, who formally presented the Hungarian congregation back to its pastor.

"I deliver back to you your community and I thank you for the time we had with your community because we were tremendously enriched by worshipping with them," Begin said.

Siklodi conducted the service, including his homily, in Hungarian, but in English he told the congregation, "When our doors closed, we entered into living a bad dream. But the love and compassion we received from Father Bob and the parishioners of St. Colman brightened our dark hours."

Shortly into the service, Siklodi slowly worked his way down the main aisle, sprinkling holy water on the faithful who made the sign of the cross.

"We are now on the road to reconstruction," said parishioner and church organist Miklos Peller. "Today is a gift and that's why we call it the 'present.' This present day is the beginning of our future."

Peller had filed an appeal to the Vatican when Cleveland Bishop Richard Lennon announced in March 2009 that he was closing dozens of churches in a sweeping downsizing plan. Some 50 churches were later closed over a 15-month period, citing diminishing parishioners, shortages of priests and light cash collections.

Eleven of the churches appealed to Rome and launched local campaigns to save their parishes. Last March, the Vatican issued decrees upholding all 11 appeals, saying Lennon had failed to follow canon law procedures for closing churches.

Part of St. Emeric's appeal was a demand for Siklodi's return; he had been sent to Cleveland by a Hungarian bishop in Romania, but, as a guest of the Cleveland diocese, was under Lennon's authority.

Following several weeks of lobbying by Peller and others, Lennon eventually agreed to bring back Siklodi. He was the only pastor out of the 11 to be brought back to the same pulpit.

"This is exciting," parishioner Marta Fordos said Sunday before Mass. "Everything we asked for in the appeal -- even our priest -- we got, thanks to the Vatican."

[Michael O'Malley writes for the *Plain-Dealer* in Cleveland]

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