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Catholics close 33 parishes in post-Katrina New Orleans [Apr 10]

by Bruce Nolan by David Hammer by Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- The Archdiocese of New Orleans on Wednesday (April 9) announced a sweeping post-Hurricane Katrina reorganization of parish life that essentially accepted the storm's permanent destruction of 17 church communities.

Archbishop Alfred Hughes announced a wide-ranging package of mergers, closures, downsizings and shared-pastor arrangements that reached far beyond the flood zone to touch churches in relatively undamaged areas.

Overall, the plan closed 33 parishes, reducing the number in the archdiocese to 108, according to church figures.

Some churches would be kept open as missions -- essentially second churches in a single parish, where the sacraments would still be celebrated.

Hughes called the downsizing plan "a pivotal moment in the history of the archdiocese."

The reorganization appeared to close permanently at least 20 churches, including some notables such as Sacred Heart of Jesus in New Orleans' Mid-City section, where Louis Armstrong was christened in 1901.

Congregations in suburban St. John the Baptist, St. Tammany and Washington parishes appeared to be unaffected in the massive restructuring.

Hughes also announced that the archdiocese will neither open nor close any parochial schools in the foreseeable future.

The Rev. Michael Jacques, one of the architects of the process, said the archdiocese does not yet have a plan for selling any of the churches. Hughes said he prefers to find another ministry-related use for them, followed by some civic use "for the common good," reserving sale for commercial use as a third option.

Parishioners' reactions ranged from anger to quiet resignation to resolve.

Members of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Uptown New Orleans reacted defiantly to the plan, which included news that they would be closed and merged with two nearby parishes.

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At Epiphany Parish in New Orleans' 7th Ward, about a dozen parishioners prayed quietly together Wednesday morning awaiting the news. "If (the merger) is what's decided, that's what we'll do," said Calvin Moret, 82. Hughes "has been appointed by Rome, by the pope, to make these decisions. Not all decisions satisfy all people, but I'll abide by what he does ... I certainly don't envy his position."

But in Kenner, Stephanie Bartolo wasn't distressed as she picked up her two children at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, which will combine with nearby Nativity of Our Lord to form a new parish. She said she was excited to help with the change.

"It opens doors of possibilities," she said. "I'm sure we'll have pews instead of just chairs. It will be a lot nicer, I really think."

Church planners said the reconfiguration was required in the face of Katrina's massive damage, which left communities thinly populated even three years later. The storm stripped the archdiocese of 20 percent of its Catholics, forced the migration of thousands of families from one part of the archdiocese to another, and left the regional church with \$120 million in uninsured flood damage.

In addition, Hughes ordered planners to reconfigure the number of pulpits in the 385,000-member archdiocese in light of a steadily declining corps of priests.

The archdiocese released new figures showing that from 1980 to 2008, the number of active and retired priests fell from 545 to 334. That factor drove much of the change far from the flood zone, Jacques said.

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Asked about the archdiocese's financial condition, Hughes said it was too complicated to characterize accurately in advance of a public financial disclosure he has ordered.

He said the archdiocese hopes to end this fiscal year June 30 in the black for the first time since the storm.

"We do pledge as an archdiocese to make full disclosure ... of amounts of damage done to church-owned buildings, insurance coverage, FEMA coverage," gifts and proceeds from real estate sales, he said.

(END SECOND OPTIONAL TRIM)

The reorganization was not developed with an eye to cutting archdiocesan operating costs, said Bishop Roger Morin.

"A cost-benefit analysis was not a factor in developing the pastoral plan," he said. "Every element of the pastoral plan was about ministry, about parish life, about serving the needs of the people in individual parishes." He said assessing its economic implications was the last step in its development.

Parishioners who object to Hughes' decision can appeal through the church's internal judicial process. But a Texas nonprofit group that provides canon law assistance for aggrieved Catholics said the odds of success are almost zero.

"I know of no cases, either handled by me or anyone else, where a (parish) closure was overturned by Rome," said Charles Wilson of the St. Joseph Foundation in San Antonio.

-- Staff writer Ramon Antonio Vargas contributed to this report.

(Bruce Nolan and David Hammer write for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.)

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