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Cleveland Catholics demand Lennon reopen parish immediately

Brian Roewe | May. 23, 2012

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Three parishioners from shuttered St. Patrick's Church attend a Mass of thanksgiving at St. Coleman Church in Cleveland on March 25. On Wednesday, their parish filed a motion in Rome urging the Vatican demand Bishop Richard G. Lennon reopen their church. (CNS/William Rieter)

Canon lawyers representing St. Patrick Parish of Cleveland filed a motion Wednesday in Rome demanding Bishop Richard G. Lennon immediately reopen the church and restore the parish, and if he won?t, have someone else do it.

The motion is the second filed by the parish since decrees came from the Congregation for the Clergy in early March ruling in favor of St. Patrick and 11 other parishes Lennon had attempted to suppress in a string of closings in 2009.

Patricia Schulte-Singleton, a parishioner of St. Patrick and head of parish advocate group Endangered Catholics, said Lennon's delayed action is "causing distress spiritually, emotionally, economically" for the parish and its parishioners.

"There has been no timetable, no definitive action plan, so you have to wonder, When is this going to happen, is he going to stall, does he really want to do this even though he's been ordered to do it by Rome?" she said. "You have to wonder, you know, what's the deal?"

Addressed to Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the congregation, the motion asks him and his dicastery "to invite His Excellency the Bishop of Cleveland to execute immediately the decree of March 1, 2012," requesting for the action to occur within 15 days.

Peter Borre, an adviser to several parishioner groups and leader of Boston-based Council of Parishes, said the 15-day request follows standard practice under canon law, where it is customary to wait 30 days for the enacting of a decree before making such a request.

The time frame expired May 17, 30 days after Lennon's April 17 announcement he would begin the reopening process for St. Patrick and 11 other churches.

The timing of the motion was a strategic attempt to ignite action on the congregation's decree before July and August, typically a quiet time at the Vatican's Roman Curia, Borre said.

Should Lennon fail to enact the decrees in that time frame, the motion calls for the congregation to have the decree executed through another party, or as Borre stated, "adult supervision be brought into the picture, to basically ensure that the bishop of Cleveland does what he is ordered to do."

Specifically, the motion names the Metropolitan bishop (the archbishop of Cincinnati, Archbishop Dennis Schnurr), the Apostolic Nunciatura (Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò) or an Apostolic visitator as possibilities to facilitate the congregation's decrees.

"We are trying to take this out of the hands of Lennon and find somebody who's hierarchically superior who will in fact implement what these decrees are all about, the restoration of the parishes, the reopening of the parochial churches," Borre said.

Additionally, the motion suggests Lennon "should pay personally damages that are caused by every day of delay that has arisen and will arise in the execution of the decree of March 1, 2012."

Borre said damages sought are both actual and symbolic, though no definitive amounts have been set. He added that all money sought would go entirely to the restored parish.

When asked for comment, a spokesman for the Cleveland diocese read a statement from Director of Media and Communications Bob Tayek: "The diocese is aware of no communication from the Vatican. Progress in under way for the reopening of parishes."

On April 17, Lennon called for "peace and unity in the diocese" and announced he would not exercise his right to appeal the decision to the Vatican's supreme court, the Apostolic Signatura, and instead would begin the process of reestablishing all 12 parishes.

Seventy days since Lennon acknowledged receiving the decrees, all churches remain shuttered.

A statement on the diocese's website May 16 said Lennon had begun to schedule meetings with small groups from each of the 12 parishes.

Tayek told The Associated Press that Lennon will have met with eight of the 11 parishes by the end of this week and will likely have met with all by the end of next week, adding that the meetings have been "crucial to the reopening process in order to determine the needs and expectations of the parishioners prior to an appointment of a pastor and the reopening of the parish."

As of Wednesday, St. Patrick has not been contacted, according to Schulte-Singleton, who said a motion would have still been filed even if he had reached out to St. Patrick.

"The integrity of the decree is really at jeopardy here," she said, adding that the lack of a timetable "does not communicate good faith."

According to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the meetings that have occurred between Lennon and parishes have been informal, with one parishioner describing the bishop as "very pleasant," though no timetable was set.

The St. Patrick motion marks the latest chapter in the saga of the Cleveland parishes, which began their fight to reclaim their churches more than three years ago. The announcement of the congregation's historic decrees in early March was met with celebration and trepidation, as parishioners were uncertain how their bishop would respond.

Lennon acknowledged receiving the decrees March 14, saying he needed time to study their meaning and decide what action he would take. One option, appealing to the Apostolic Signatura, had a deadline of 60 days. Although Lennon stated April 17 he would not appeal, the option expired May 12.

Before Lennon made his decision, St. Patrick and two other parishes -- St. Casimir and St. James -- filed

motions in Rome on March 30, before Holy Week began, requesting the congregation order Lennon to take immediate action on their decrees.

In the time since his announcement, Lennon has made little progress in fulfilling the congregation's orders. On April 26, the bishop eliminated the diocese's pastoral planning office -- expected to play a key role in the restoration process -- and delegated its duties among the diocesan staff.

The landmark decrees from the congregation ruled Lennon erred both procedurally and substantively in both the suppression of the parishes and closing of the churches.

In announcing his consolidation plan for the diocese in March 2009, Lennon cited demographic shifts, a shortage of priests and financial troubles as the reasons he had to shutter churches.

Canon lawyers have said the Vatican is more stringent with bishops attempting to relegate a church building for secular use. Specifically, the reasons Lennon listed are no longer considered the grave reason required for taking such action.

In addition to St. Patrick, the 12 successfully appealing parishes are St. Mary and St. John the Baptist parishes in Akron; St. Mary parish in Bedford; St. Adalbert, St. Barbara, St. Casimir, St. Emeric, St. Peter and St. Wendelin in Cleveland; St. James in Lakewood*; and St. Mary in Lorain.

** An earlier version of this story incorrectly named the town in which St. James is located.*

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