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Questions hang over Cleveland parish's status

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The Cleveland diocese's website lists St. Margaret Mary Parish of South Euclid, Ohio, as having merged with St. Gregory the Great Parish to become Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish. As such, it is one of the many mergers that have been part of the downsizing of the diocese during the past five years.

But another page of the site lists St. Margaret Mary as one of the parish closings that is "under appeal to the Vatican." The description, on a page headed "Summary of Closed Parish Cash Receipts and Disbursements," continues: "No disposition or other activities will occur until the appeal has been completely addressed by the Vatican."

The discrepancy probably would have gone unnoticed, or chalked up to clerical error, except for the persistent questions that began to gnaw at Michael Gronick and his mother, Patricia, a lifelong member of the parish, questions that only became compounded with more questions as they approached local and Vatican church officials for answers.

The confusion seems to have originated when the diocese announced earlier this year that 12 churches originally closed by Bishop Richard G. Lennon in 2009 and 2010 would be reopened after the Vatican ruled favorably on appeals submitted on behalf of the parishes. The diocese announced that the Vatican had turned down the appeal of a 13th parish, St. Margaret Mary.

The Gronicks, presuming that the circumstances leading the Vatican to overturn Lennon's decisions about the other parishes applied also to St. Margaret Mary, wanted to know why the Vatican had reached a different decision regarding their parish. They approached the diocese and asked to see the documentation, but Michael Gronick said the diocese responded that the documentation was secret and couldn't be released.

He and his mother hired a canon lawyer, Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Sr. Kate Kuenstler, to advise them. They wrote to the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, asking why they had not received word on the disposition of the appeal, only to learn, according to the congregation, "that a decree was never issued in the matter [of St. Margaret Mary] because no hierarchic recourse was ever presented to this Dicastery." In other words, while the diocesan website said that any decision about the parish was awaiting word from Rome, the Vatican was saying they had not received any request for a decision. Other correspondence with the papal nuncio in the United States yielded no further answers.

NCR emailed questions to Robert Tayek, director of media and public relations for the diocese, inquiring whether he could clear up the discrepancies in the description of the parish and describe the state of the parish assets. Tayek responded Aug. 17: "St. Margaret Mary parish is closed and there is no apparent recourse. The property belongs to the merged parish, Sacred Heart of Jesus, and it will be responsible for disposition of the property."

Perhaps further evidence that the matter is a settled question for the diocese is the fact that the parish building has been returned to the tax rolls, according to Lou Gentile, commercial appraisal manager with the Cuyahoga

County Fiscal Office.

Gentile, in an Aug. 28 interview, said exactly how many church-owned properties have been or ultimately will be returned to the tax rolls is unknown because the situation of the closings and mergers remains fluid. Some buildings that originally were returned to the rolls are now being taken off again because the Vatican has reversed Lennon's orders on at least 11 of them.

In addition, he said, if a county property is considered exempt on Jan. 1 of a given year, it remains exempt for that entire following year even if its status as a religious use facility changes during that period.

He also said that some clarity should emerge in the coming year because the county, which includes South Euclid, is in the midst of an every-six-year assessment of all properties within the jurisdiction.

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