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By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

A Vatican congregation has overturned the closing of 13 parishes in the Diocese of Cleveland. The ruling reverses some of the closings ordered by Bishop Richard G. Lennon since 2009 under a diocesan-wide reconfiguration plan. The churches must be restored for worship, a person involved with the cases said.

The Congregation for Clergy's ruling in support of parishioners who appealed the closings is a

rare instance. Bishop Lennon can appeal the rulings to the Apostolic Signature, the Vatican's highest court. Decrees released by parishioners of two parishes March 8 cited Canons 515 and 1222 and the procedural and substantive steps that were not followed under them.

Both canons require a bishop to consult with his diocesan council of priests prior to taking any action to suppress a parish or close a church building. The congregation ruled that Bishop Lennon did not adhere to those requirements.

It is evident, therefore, that the requirements of law for the licit and valid relegation of a church to secular but not unbecoming use have not been met and that St. Patrick Church (one of the parishes in the decision) has not been lawfully and validly relegated to secular but not unbecoming use. A diocesan spokesman said the documents from the congregation had not been received as of the morning of March 9.

The Diocese of Cleveland was awaiting official word from the Vatican concerning any decrees," a prepared statement read. "We first must see the official documents in order to review them and understand what exactly is being said. Only then can a response be determined."

The Vatican's decision was met with jubilation, prayers of thanksgiving, and song as parishioners gathered to celebrate outside of several of the closed churches in the hours after they learned of the rulings March 7.

"We're as stunned as anybody," said Bob Kloos, a leader in the group Endangered Catholics and a member of the Community of St. Peter, which was formed by parishioners of the closed St. Peter Church who created a nonprofit corporation to stay together as a Catholic worship community and continue various ministries in Cleveland's inner city.

One of the inner city churches affected was St. Adalbert/OLBS, located at 2347 E. 83rd St., the first African American Catholic congregation in Cleveland.

"When I first heard the news that St. Adalbert was among the 13 parishes to be reopened, I was elated, overjoyed. But then reality set in. It's not going to open next week, probably not next

month. All the pieces that were removed from the church have to be put back and that takes time," said long time member Gloria Foster.

"What would it be like, will we get our previous priest back," she continued. "If so, I'll be right there on the front steps to greet him. If not, I have a lot of things to think about. It's been almost two years and a lot has changed.

Foster went on to discuss her spiritual connection to the church. "St. Adalbert, by way of OLBS, has always been my parish home, but from 2000 through 2010, St. Adalbert was actually my refuge."

Following Bishop Richard Lennon's March order to close St. Adalbert's, parishioners appealed to the diocese but were denied. Although St. Adalbert's Elementary School stayed open, the church closed in June 2010.

But the parish had always vowed to fight.

St. Adalbert's was established in 1883. The existing church, a twin-towered, brick-and-stone edifice, was built in 1911.

By the 1960s, the neighborhood was solidly Black and Cleveland's first Black Catholic congregation moved into its new home, painting the faces Black on the statues left behind by the Bohemians.

The important point now is for all 13 churches to work together to help each other, to share ideas, and to share resources.

In some cases, Bishop Lennon followed the recommendations. In others, he decided to close some parishes that were not targeted for closing by the cluster groups, upsetting many involved in the process.

Some closures were met with sit-ins and prayer vigils. At St. Casimir Parish, a church serving the Polish community on Cleveland's east side, parishioners gathered outside every Sunday to pray and read Scripture since November 2009.

Bishop Lennon has 60 days to appeal the congregation's decisions to the Apostolic Signature once he receives the decrees. He can also file a motion with the Congregation for Clergy for reconsideration.

Editors Note: Next Week we will explore the possibility of people returning to their closed churches.