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Resistance widens to parish closings

The Boston Globe

After uneasy calm, protests resume

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | May 8, 2005

A lengthy but uneasy calm between the Archdiocese of Boston and local Catholics resisting church closings has come to an end, as worshipers from a variety of communities and from across the theological spectrum ratchet up their confrontation with Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley.

The first new vigil in six months began Friday in Framingham, where a small group occupied a parish church slated to close this week. On Thursday, a coalition of parish-closing critics began formulating a new legal strategy to challenge the archdiocese in civil courts. And at least 16 parishes are awaiting decisions from the new pope, Benedict XVI, on appeals that argue the closings violate the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law.

There are also a variety of local resistance strategies unfolding. Worshipers at a South End parish that is slated to close next month plan to stage a financial protest against the archdiocese today by withholding funds from a special collection. The former parishioners of a closed Brighton parish are planning to use municipal zoning regulations in an effort to prevent archdiocesan reuse of that parish's school building. And some former parishioners of a closed South Natick parish are planning to hold an outdoor Mass today, to be celebrated by a married priest whose ministry is not sanctioned by the archdiocese.

The archdiocese says that most parishioners of closing parishes have moved on to other churches and that it hopes the protesters will eventually do the same.

But tensions between the archdiocese and its critics are rising, as worshipers at closing parishes report an increasing number of disagreements with priests and other church employees. In Newton, a priest suggested that Catholics who contribute to an organization opposed to a church closing could be at increased risk of an Internal Revenue Service audit, and in Framingham, a church employee barred Catholics critical of a church closing from distributing leaflets in a church parking lot.

"A no answer is not the end of the line," said Cynthia Deysher, cochairwoman of the Coalition of Parishes and a parishioner at St. Anselm Church in Sudbury.

St. Anselm was occupied by parishioners on Sept. 12 and remains occupied, as its members warily wait to learn the specifics of O'Malley's March 31 promise to reopen the closed church as a chapel, rather than as a full-fledged parish.

"The churches that have been in vigil a long time are not giving up," Deysher said. "The archbishop is going to have his hands full."

The archdiocese says it is concerned about the vigils, but that they represent a minority of parishioners at a minority of closing parishes.

In Framingham, for example, there were three to five people present Friday afternoon at the start of the vigil, and about 10 overnight. Vigil organizer Mary Beth Carmody said she has a list of more than 110 individuals and families who have agreed to help.

"The majority of the people from those parishes have transitioned to a new parish and, together with welcoming parishioners, are building new parish communities across the archdiocese," archdiocesan spokeswoman Kelly Lynch said in a written response to questions from the Globe. "The archdiocese continues to experience challenges, which we are responding to with attention to the concerns of those who have found reconfiguration to be difficult."

In the year since O'Malley launched what he called a reconfiguration of the archdiocese, he has closed or merged 59 parishes. There are now 300 parishes, down from 357, in the 144 cities and towns in Eastern Massachusetts that make up the Archdiocese of Boston.

Citing a shortage of priests, worshipers, and cash, O'Malley announced plans to close a total of 83 parishes, but protests have caused him to reconsider a handful of decisions. The archdiocese now says that, in addition to the 59 parishes closed or merged so far, another 20 are slated to close.

Church officials have no clear plan for resolving an increasing number of disputes with parishioners. O'Malley has not visited the eight closing parishes now occupied by parishioners and has not responded to many of their requests for information or dialogue; Lynch said that members of a committee advising the archbishop "have been or will be in touch with representatives at each vigil to assist them with the transition process."

The level of public rancor between the protesters and the archdiocese had lessened considerably as the archdiocese mostly avoided closing parishes during the penitential season of Lent and as the advisory committee, headed by Peter Meade and Sister Janet Eisner, reexamined the parish-closing decisions. And then the focus of the church hierarchy and of many lay Catholics shifted to mourning for Pope John Paul II after the long-serving pontiff died April 2.

But the archdiocese is now preparing to resume closing parishes. St. Jeremiah, in north Framingham, is scheduled to close Friday, followed by the Sunday closings of two Boston parishes, St. John-St. Hugh in Dorchester and St. Francis de Sales-St. Philip in Roxbury. The two Boston parishes are to be replaced by a new one, St. Katharine Drexel, which will use the churches of both closing parishes, according to the archdiocese.

A conflict is brewing in Boston's South End, where the archdiocese is planning to close Holy Trinity Church on June 30. Holy Trinity is home to two unique congregations that have bonded together to fight the closing: the only German-Catholic congregation in New England and the only archdiocesan congregation that celebrates Mass in Latin.

The congregation that celebrates Mass in Latin is made up of some of the most conservative Catholics in the archdiocese, and many of the worshipers drive long distances to participate in the traditional Mass. O'Malley has decided to relocate the Latin Mass to a church in Chinatown, St. James the Greater, but the worshipers are unhappy and say they cannot get the archdiocese to respond to questions.

Today, the German and Latin Rite congregations at Holy Trinity plan to demonstrate their pique by placing slips of paper reading "What Communication?" into the baskets used for a special, nationwide collection used to fund Catholic communications, including Boston's archdiocesan newspaper, The Pilot.

Meanwhile, the Council of Parishes is debating a broader attempt to block the closings through civil courts, a strategy that has not succeeded elsewhere. Worshipers at two closed parishes, St. Albert the Great in Weymouth and Sacred Heart in the North End, sued the archdiocese, and worshipers at the closed St. Frances Xavier Cabrini in Scituate and the closing St. Jeremiah in Framingham say they plan to file suit.

Two Boston lawyers, John M. Galvin and Mary K. Ames, met with the Council of Parishes Thursday night, and some members of the organization are suggesting that multiple parishes sue the archdiocese in several different counties, using a variety of legal theories, in a multipronged effort to block some closings.

In Brighton, the former parishioners of the closed Our Lady of the Presentation Church plan to fight a zoning waiver that the city says is needed by the archdiocese for a planned conversion of Presentation school into offices for the archdiocese's Metropolitan Tribunal, which hears requests for marriage annulments. "We're prepared to do everything in our power to make sure they don't get zoning relief," said Kevin M. Carragee, chairman of the Presentation School Foundation, which wanted to buy the school building to keep the school open.

O'Malley has promised not to act against occupiers of closed parishes until the Vatican has ruled on the pending appeals. The Vatican had pledged to act on many of those appeals by Tuesday, but the archdiocese said it does not know whether the death of John Paul II has affected that schedule.

The Globe made repeated efforts in Rome to get an explanation of the appeals process from the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, which oversees such appeals.

An undersecretary at the office at first denied that the agency was involved with the parish closings; after the Globe pointed out that the agency's secretary had signed letters to many of the closed parishes, the undersecretary referred calls to the secretary, who then referred calls to the prefect, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos. The cardinal did not respond to repeated requests for an interview made both by phone and in writing.

St. Jeremiah's is the ninth closing parish to be occupied by worshipers. Three of the occupations have resulted in the archdiocese modifying or reversing a church-closing plan. Two potential vigils were thwarted by police action: in Natick, where two parishioners were arrested after refusing to leave a closing parish, and in Winchester, where one was arrested.

Only one vigil has ended, at St. Bernard in Newton, but the situation there has worsened in the five months since O'Malley pledged to reconsider the plan to close that church.

Relations between a group called Friends of St. Bernard's and the administrator appointed by O'Malley have deteriorated to the point that the administrator, the Rev. James M. Mahoney, said in a February parish bulletin that he had checked with the IRS about the tax status of the Friends group, discovered that it did not appear on a list of tax-exempt organizations, and warned "the possibility of an audit with your taxes to be filed this year may be increased."

A parishioner responded with a letter of complaint against Mahoney to Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly.

Last week the Friends organization sent a letter to O'Malley, outlining concerns about the management of the parish. Asked about the letter, Lynch, the archdiocesan spokeswoman, responded that Mahoney "is providing pastoral care for those parishes and is working with both parish communities [in West Newton and Auburndale] to offer the archbishop a recommendation for the pastoral care of the Catholic community in that part of Newton."

Frustrations are also high in Weymouth, where worshipers who have been occupying the closed St. Albert the Great parish since Aug. 29 are upset that five weeks have gone by since O'Malley promised to reopen the church. Not only has the parish not yet reopened, but some parishioners are concerned that the archdiocese may try to rename the parish before reopening it.

"The archbishop is working to expedite the canonical process required to establish a new parish at that location," said Lynch, the archdiocesan spokeswoman.

That kind of talk infuriates parishioners, who say the archdiocese has sent repeated conflicting messages about matters as seemingly straightforward as when a Mass could be held. One Mass is now scheduled for today.

"We need these people not to be arguing about the canonical process, but to just issue a decree that reestablishes St. Albert the Great Parish in Weymouth, period," said vigil spokesman Colin Riley. "Where is the pastoral leadership here?"

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