



Sandi Jones awaited a hug from Ann Stevenson, embracing Pellegrino Tulimieri yesterday at St. Albert the Great church in Weymouth. (Globe Staff Photo / Esdras M. Suarez)

Weymouth parish achieves vigil's goal Archdiocesan decree reopens St. Albert's, occupied 10 months

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 15, 2005

Ten weeks after promising to do so, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley has issued a decree formally reopening St. Albert the Great Church in Weymouth, which has been occupied by protesters for nearly 10 months.

Parishioners at St. Albert's, who learned of the decision yesterday, were delighted with the development, but frustrated that it had taken so long. The St. Albert's protest, called a vigil, has become the model for other Catholics opposing O'Malley's efforts to close nearly 80 parishes in Eastern Massachusetts.

St. Albert's parishioners cheered news of the decree with balloons and hugs.

"I think you have seen that David did slay Goliath," said Mary Akoury, cochairwoman of the parish council, to the hurrahs of about two dozen parishioners who came last night for the evening prayer session.

A spokesman for the parishioners said they would continue to sleep at the church at least through Friday night, when they have a scheduled parish council meeting, at which they will discuss whether to end the occupation. Parishioners will also seek assurances from the archdiocese that it plans to return the parish's money, estimated at \$200,000; that it will restore a full complement of daily and weekend Masses and other sacramental activities; will return the parish's records, which were sent to church archives; and will support the return of church groups that existed before the parish was closed last August.

"The lack of progress during these 10 weeks was frustrating and unnecessarily aggravating," said the spokesman, Colin Riley, who pointed out that a longtime parishioner who lived across the street from St. Albert's recently died knowing that her funeral could not be celebrated at her parish because the archdiocese had not yet technically reopened it. Riley said the parishioners are mindful of what has taken place at St. Bernard Church in West Newton, where parishioners abandoned a vigil after O'Malley promised not to close the church. The archbishop has yet to fully restore the staff, programs, and worship services that parish had enjoyed before being targeted for closing.

Riley did not say that ending the vigil was contingent on the response of the archdiocese to the parishioners' list of expectations, but said that the congregation would have to decide how it wants to proceed.

"The parish council meets Friday, and we will hear the parishioners' concerns and see what they want to do," Riley said. "There's been a lot of investment here."

O'Malley's spokesman, Terrence C. Donilon, announced the reopening yesterday. He said in an interview that the Rev. Laurence J. Borges, whom O'Malley formally appointed as pastor of St. Albert as part of the reopening, would handle the details.

"Going forward, all of the details concerning the organization of parish life will be coordinated by Father Borges as he works closely with the parishioners of St. Albert," Donilon said.

The archbishop, Donilon added, "looks forward to seeing St. Albert the Great prosper as a vibrant and energetic and spiritual parish." Donilon said the decision to reopen St. Albert "demonstrates his willingness and openness to take a second look at situations like St. Albert, and he was able to do that in a way that is beneficial to the community and beneficial to the archdiocese."

The appointment of Borges disappointed parishioners who had asked O'Malley to reinstate the pastor at the time of their closing, Rev. Ronald D. Coyne. Borges served as pastor of St. Albert's for six years in the 1990s, and he is now one of two copastors overseeing St. Stephen Parish in Framingham.

Reached in Framingham yesterday, Borges had little to say about his plans. "I just want to get down there, and get the lay of the land," he said. "It'll be fine working with the people down there. I know most of them."

O'Malley decided to reopen the parish based on the recommendation of the Meade-Eisner Commission, a lay-dominated advisory group he appointed to review some parish-closing decisions. The group is expected to make a new round of recommendations soon; O'Malley has already made several changes to the closings plan as a result of the commission's recommendations, but has also reaffirmed the majority of his decisions.

Since last summer, O'Malley has closed 63 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes, including St. Albert's and seven others currently occupied by protesters. He intends to close approximately another 17 parishes, citing a shortage of priests, worshipers, and money.

St. Albert's was the first closed parish whose parishioners simply refused to leave. They have been occupying the church around the clock since Aug. 29, with hundreds of volunteers. They have offered, without a priest or paid staff, twice-daily prayer vigils, a Sunday communion service with consecrated wafers supplied by a sympathetic priest, as well as adult religious education and even occasional yoga and ballroom dancing classes.

But, without a priest, the parish could not have Mass. O'Malley agreed to allow a priest to say Mass there on Christmas and Easter and, for the last few weeks, once per weekend or at funerals, weddings, baptisms, and other religious activities. Staff was laid off, fraternal organizations disbanded, and some parishioners left for other parishes or left the church.

O'Malley announced his decision to reopen St. Albert's on March 31; he signed the decree formalizing the decision on Monday, the same day that he agreed to pursue the sale of a parochial school building in Brighton to a neighborhood group that also had been protesting the archdiocese's actions. The decree reopening St. Albert's was signed just days after Thursday night's fire that destroyed another Weymouth church, Sacred Heart, but O'Malley said Sunday that he did not view the decision about whether to rebuild Sacred Heart Church as being linked to the situation at St. Albert's.

The archdiocese offered little explanation for why it took so long to reopen St. Albert's, other than to say it involved "canonical process."

At the parish last night, parishioners were preparing for an impromptu celebration. At 5:45, Claire Mullin, 56, left to get balloons to hang before the regularly scheduled prayer session; she and her husband returned with

a dozen white balloons but decided to hang only 10, for the 10 months of the vigil.

Fred Harrington, 80, said he had been sitting in the church foyer for several hours, saying congratulations to everyone who walked through the door.

Anne Marie McCarthy, 64, who brought brownies and milk, said she expected the vigil to end soon. "Now that we have the paperwork in our hand, we can almost stop," she said.

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