

Archdiocese halts plans to close five parishes O'Malley cites lay panel advice

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 17, 2005

CHICAGO -- Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley announced yesterday evening that he will allow to remain open five parishes that he had planned to close and that he will reopen as a chapel a Brookline parish that has already closed.

O'Malley, who is in Chicago for a meeting of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, said he decided to reverse the closing decisions based on the recommendations of a lay-dominated panel he appointed in response to controversy over his sweeping effort to reconfigure the sprawling Archdiocese of Boston.

"We're trying to bring the whole process to a conclusion in as orderly a fashion as we can," O'Malley said in an interview. "Prolonging the process is making it more difficult for the whole diocese."

As a result of yesterday's announcement, O'Malley will allow to remain open two Boston parishes, St. Mary of the Angels in Roxbury's Egleston Square, and St. Peter, a parish formed to serve Lithuanian immigrants in South Boston. In the suburbs, St. Pius X in Milton, St. Isidore in Stow, and Sacred Heart in Watertown will remain open.

In Brookline, he will reopen Infant Jesus-St. Lawrence, a Chestnut Hill parish that has been occupied by protesters since it closed Oct. 30, as a chapel of the other parish in town, St. Mary of the Assumption in Brookline Village.

He also granted a three-year reprieve -- until the current pastor's term is up -- to St. Susanna in Dedham.

O'Malley's decisions were welcomed by those affected.

"There's no words to explain what's going on inside our minds and hearts," said John Healy, a 25-year parishioner at Infant Jesus-St. Lawrence, where worshipers hugged one another, honked their horns, toasted with sparkling wine and diet Coke, and prayed with their new pastor as they celebrated last night. "This is better than the Red Sox winning the World Series," Healy said.

At Sacred Heart in Watertown, parishioner Judith Schwab exulted, "I can't tell you what it means to me. I was just so dumbfounded and excited. I've had people start crying on the phone, people screaming, 'Our prayers have been answered.' It's been an unbelievable reaction."

The archbishop, who has closed 62 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes since last summer, still faces huge challenges, particularly in what to do about seven parishes that remain occupied by protesters trying to force him to reverse closing decisions. He also faces several civil suits and multiple canon law appeals over the closing decisions and state scrutiny of how he deals with money and objects given to parishes for restricted purposes.

He has previously reversed several closings decisions, and on Monday he issued a decree reopening a parish that had been closed for nearly 10 months, St. Albert the Great in East Weymouth.

O'Malley said there are still a handful of contested closings that he may revisit, depending on the assessment of the Meade-Eisner Commission. And, he said, the archdiocese can always reconsider the fate of parishes as circumstances change; in some of the cases announced yesterday, O'Malley said he was simply lifting the closing date, but not making any permanent promises.

"I am trying to look at the pastoral needs and to make sure that we had not rushed ahead too quickly with some of these decisions," he said.

O'Malley's spokesman, Terrence C. Donilon, said that over the next three years, the archdiocese plans to close 15 parishes; some of these are being reviewed by the commission. The next scheduled closing is in Boston's South End, where Holy Trinity, the last parish for German immigrants in New England and the only one in the Archdiocese of Boston to offer Mass in Latin, had previously been granted an extension until December.

In addition to the closings, there are also two sections of the archdiocese, in Nashoba Valley and along the Northeastern seacoast, where O'Malley has asked clusters of five parishes to prepare a plan for surviving with fewer priests: three priests for five towns in the Nashoba Valley and two priests for five towns in the Seacoast communities.

The impending closings have taken a toll on some parishes, which have lost parishioners who have moved on to other churches or simply left. But others have found their communities strengthened by the threat of closure.

"On some levels, it's been a wasted year, but in other ways the parish has never been more strong and together and focused," said the Rev. Stephen S. Josoma, pastor of St. Susanna in Dedham, where parishioners were notified 13 months ago that the church would close but then heard essentially nothing else about closing from the archdiocese until yesterday's reprieve. "It's had great effects, in spite of the craziness," said Josoma, whose six-year term as pastor ends in March of 2008, at which point O'Malley said he would reassess the future of that parish.

Peter Meade, an executive vice president of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts who chairs the Meade-Eisner Commission with Sister Janet Eisner, president of Emmanuel College, said in a telephone interview that he hopes the commission will wrap up its work by the 4th of July. He said there is "a handful" of parish closing decisions that the commission is still reviewing.

"The common thread here is the archbishop's willingness to listen to a group of laypeople," he said. "We went out and talked to people, came back with recommendations, and took them up with the archbishop, and he thought about them and agreed with what you have today."

Meade said that despite all the controversy over the parish closings, he continues to believe the effort is justified.

"It is as clear as it can be that we have declining vocations and declining attendance and declining dollars, so something has to be done," he said.

Neither Meade nor O'Malley would talk about what the archdiocese will do about the people who are occupying closed churches. O'Malley has said he would not act against the protesters before the Vatican rules on their canonical appeals of his closings decisions. But he said yesterday that the archdiocese has been asked by the Vatican to respond to the appeals, and that he expects the Vatican to issue its rulings in the next several weeks, noting that much of Italy goes on vacation in August.

"We're asking people to realize that these sacrifices we're making for a greater good, so that the mission of the church will be able to continue, so that we'll be able to have resources that are needed to be able to serve the Catholic population of all parts of the archdiocese, and to continue our commitment to the poor and to the newcomers," he said.

O'Malley said he still believes that the parish closings, though painful, are needed, and he said other urban dioceses in the Northeast and the Midwest have done the same or are preparing to do so.

"All of this reconfiguration, as painful as it has been, is going to allow us in the future to continue staffing our parishes and meeting our obligations," he said. "But we still have great challenges out there."

Facing one of its latest challenges, the archdiocese today is planning to announce that it will build a new church in Weymouth Landing to replace Sacred Heart Church, which was destroyed in a fire last Thursday night.

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