



Parishioners seek clarification of who owns Catholic churches

By Marie Szaniszlo

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A group of local Catholics plans to ask the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops how the Archdiocese of Boston can close more than a quarter of its parishes by claiming it owns the properties while the conference's own president is trying to fend off lawsuits by clergy-abuse victims by claiming church assets belong to parishioners.

"To us, this is just a glaring inconsistency," said Peter Borre of the Council of Parishes. "We're going to . . . demand that this issue be resolved."

The Bishops' Conference is scheduled to meet next week in Chicago. The council wants it to clarify how church law defines ownership of parish assets.

Last May, [Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley](#) announced plans to close more than 80 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes. Parishioners at a half-dozen churches continue to hold sit-ins to try to keep them open, with some arguing church assets belong to parishioners.

Last month, meanwhile, the conference's president, Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., filed documents in U.S. Bankruptcy Court claiming his diocese cannot sell churches and other buildings to settle sexual-abuse claims because it does not own the property; it merely holds them in trust. The diocese filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in December.

Yesterday, Terrence Donilon, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Boston, said, "The circumstances of a diocese in the midst of bankruptcy proceedings differ from those of a diocese that needs to reconfigure."

Under civil law, the vast majority of the churches in the archdiocese are owned by a corporation controlled exclusively by the archbishop.






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