

Parishioners may have new churches paid for

By Eric Convey and Marie Szaniszlo / Boston Herald

Thursday, August 11, 2005

A powerful Vatican agency is poised to let parishioners from seven closed Catholic churches take millions of dollars of assets to their new parishes -- a step that would derail a plan by archdiocesan leaders to use the money for broad church needs.

To head off a final ruling to that effect, the archdiocese is trying to persuade pastors of parishes receiving members from closed neighboring churches to voluntarily give up the money.

"When all is said and done, the goals of reconfiguration need to be in place and supported," [Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley](#) said in an interview. "And we will work with the Holy See to be sure that this happens in a way that shows respect for our traditions and canon law."

O'Malley ordered reconfiguration to deal with problems including a decline in the number of priests, financial pressures on the archdiocese exacerbated by the clergy sexual abuse scandal and shifting demographics.

The seven pastors have met with archdiocesan officials. Six are discussing the situation with their finance councils. One has already agreed.

The Rev. Bryan Hehir, head of Catholic Charities and an archdiocesan spokesman on the issue, acknowledged that the question of whether to send the money to the archdiocese is "very difficult and complicated."

The problem with letting each closing parish take its assets to a neighboring parish is that wealthy parishes would get bigger and wealthier, and poorer parishes would get bigger and poorer, he said.

David Castaldi, a former archdiocesan chancellor who helped form the lay group Voice of the Faithful, said the Vatican decision represents "complications" for the archdiocese.

"Given that the archdiocese is in significant financial difficulty, I think it is appropriate for the assets to be used for the wider church," he said. "But unless and until the archdiocese makes a complete financial disclosure, it will not be able to restore the trust and credibility it needs."

Archdiocesan officials have pledged to make public a detailed financial accounting but have yet to do so.

The decision by the Congregation for Clergy affects seven of the 15 parishes whose members appealed closings. Both St. Jeremiah's in Framingham and St. Anselm's in Sudbury appealed their orders to close. Among those that did not prevail are ethnic churches and other parishes with no geographic borders.

The action is unlikely to affect the four dozen parishes that accepted their suppression without appealing.

"If you go by canon law, their time for appealing is over," said the Rev. Mark O'Connell, a canon lawyer for the archdiocese who has been dealing with the issue.

O'Malley said the preliminary decisions from Rome are important not just because of the questions that were raised, but because the Vatican showed its approval for the reconfiguration process in general.

"The Holy See supports the parish closings and the goals that we have. There's been some disagreement as to what the proper canons should have been. But we've been working with them to try and work through those," he said.

"I think this is more of a procedural problem, that what we are doing is important for the church in Boston, and the Holy See will certainly work with us to help us ensure that the goals of reconfiguration are achieved," he said. "We don't have other options."

If the pastors decline to hand the money over to the archdiocese and the Congregation for Clergy then takes action, the archdiocese could appeal to a Vatican

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panel called the Apostolic Signatura.

But Hehir said no decision has been made as to whether an appeal would be filed.

David Smith, chancellor of the archdiocese, said he hopes there will be "a collaborative process as opposed to an adversarial process."

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