

Canon lawyer sides with archdiocese on services

By D. Craig MacCormack / Daily News Staff

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FRAMINGHAM -- Appeal Committee members continue to check on whether a Communion service at St. Jeremiah Church meets a Catholic's weekly obligation to attend Sunday Mass after a canon lawyer told them it doesn't.

Charles M. Wilson, executive director of the Saint Joseph Foundation in San Antonio, told Appeal Committee co-Chairwoman Mary Beth Carmody this week that the consensus among foundation members is Mass is part of the weekly duty.

"The Foundation believes that (Communion) services do not satisfy the obligation and has said so publicly on a number of occasions," said Wilson in an e-mail sent to the Daily News yesterday.

Members at other parishes in vigil in the Archdiocese of Boston told the Appeal Committee that Communion services satisfy a Catholic's obligation to attend Mass of Sunday, said Carmody.

"I'm still trying to figure this whole thing out," she said. "I take this very seriously, and I want to find out the answer. I know it's within canon law. The only question is whether it meets the weekly obligation."

Last week, in a statement, Bishop Richard Lennon, the archdiocese's vicar general, said under Church law all Catholics have an obligation to participate at Sunday Mass unless it is impossible for them to attend.

Communion services do not fulfill one's obligation to participate at Sunday Mass, Lennon said.

Peter Borre, co-chairman of the Council of Parishes, disputed the archdiocese's stance, saying canon law dictates Communion services are valid until a church has been formally deconsecrated.

After the deconsecration, the church becomes "profane" in the canonical sense, said Borre.

Carmody asked Wilson for advice after questions arose before last week's Communion services at St. Jeremiah, which began its around-the-clock vigil May 6. Services are set for today at 4:30 and tomorrow at 10:15 a.m.

Wilson sent his response to Carmody on May 20, but she didn't see the e-mail until Monday.

About 110 people came to the first weekend of services, said Carmody, with about 120 attending last week.

Carmody wouldn't say if she attends Mass on Sundays and remains unsure if the Communion service meets her weekly obligation. She advised all Catholics to attend Mass if they felt it necessary in addition to the Communion service.

She also noted the Communion service is enough for parishioners who are disabled or physically impaired because they cannot always attend Masses at St. George, the parish to which St. Jeremiah communicants were sent.

St. George is installing a handicapped lift to assist disabled people.

In cases when a priest is not available, said Wilson, other celebrations may be held. Special provisions have been made by the Church to facilitate the proper conduct of such celebrations.

Only the "competent ecclesiastical authority" -- in this case, Archbishop Sean O'Malley -- can grant or deny permission for celebrations held in the absence of a priest, said Wilson.

Neither the lay faithful nor the Saint Joseph Foundation has the authority to do so, he said.

The Foundation assisted the St. Jeremiah Appeal Committee in writing its appeal of O'Malley's May 11 order to close the church effective May 13. The archbishop told committee members he will respond within the 30-day window.

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