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Vatican high court upholds closing of St. Adalbert Church

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For the second time, the Vatican has upheld a decision by Bishop Edward U. Kmiec to close St. Adalbert Catholic Church in the Broadway-Fillmore area.

The Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, considered the Vatican's highest court, determined that Kmiec properly followed canon law when he decided in July 2007 to merge St. Adalbert into nearby St. John Kanty Parish.

The ruling upheld an earlier one by the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, which also sided with Kmiec.

The Vatican's two-page decree, written in Latin and signed by Bishop Velasio De Paolis, secretary of the Apostolic Signatura, was delivered to diocesan officials Monday.

For parishioners, it is likely the final recourse in appealing the closure under a provision of the Catholic Church's code of canon law.

But parish trustee Ronald Suchocki said Wednesday that he was not made aware of the Vatican letter.

"I haven't received any type of notification. You would think, as in the first case, they'd notify ... us," Suchocki said. "I can't really comment on what I've not got."

Suchocki said he had received a letter from the Congregation for the Clergy last December upholding the closing.

He and other parishioners then took their appeal to the next level, sending a packet of information to the Apostolic Signatura in January. Suchocki said he was under the impression those documents would need to be translated into Latin for the case to be heard by the Supreme Tribunal, a step they had yet to take — so he was surprised a judgment already had been made.

"I haven't heard anything from our canonical lawyer," he added.

Kmiec said in a prepared statement Wednesday that he hopes St. Adalbert members will now move forward with the merger.

"I know that this is a painful time for St. Adalbert parishioners, as well as for Catholics in parishes throughout the diocese," he said. "These painful decisions are necessary for the future of the church. We are faced with the dual challenge of dwindling Mass attendance and a dramatically smaller number of priests."

The parish, founded in 1886, is the second-oldest Polish-Catholic congregation in Buffalo. The stately red brick church features a unique high altar and paintings by Joseph Mazur, and it is one of only a handful in the area built in the basilica style.

But membership and Mass attendance have suffered. The parish counted about 280 registered families on its rolls in

2007, down from 529 a decade earlier. On average, an estimated 200 people attend three weekend Masses, even though the huge sanctuary is capable of seating 1,100.

Still, parishioners who remain are passionate about keeping the church doors open.

"We're fighting it," said Dorothy Manka, who already endured one church closing in 1992, when the diocese shut down Transfiguration Church on Sycamore Street, causing her to move over to St. Adalbert. "We're praying very hard to keep that church open."

Manka, 83, walks to St. Adalbert for weekend Mass and said she'll probably just stay home if it is shut down.

"If they close this church, I won't go to another church," she said.

Diocesan officials said parishioners of St. Mary Church in Lockport and Transfiguration in Olean also are planning appeals.

Transfiguration was scheduled to become an oratory, used only for special services, in a merger with two other parishes, and St. Mary was to join a union of three other Lockport-area churches that merged earlier this month.

Those appeals have yet to be considered.

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