

St. Adalbert Parishioners appeal to Vatican on Closing

'Its going to be a very costly process'

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Members of St. Adalbert parish on Buffalo's East Side say they won't watch their church be closed without a fight.

On Wednesday, they revealed they're taking that fight all the way to the Vatican.

Parish leaders Ronald Suchocki, Stanley A. Kowalski Jr. and Ted Kniazuk sent a 20-page facsimile to the Vatican as a formal appeal of Bishop Edward U. Kmiec's decision to close the 121-year-old church.

The largely Polish-American parish on Stanislaus Street is slated to merge, probably later this year, with St. John Kanty Church on Broadway, another parish with Polish roots.

"Basically, we said that we felt the bishop made a mistake. We requested that they check into our situation and, in effect, repeal the decree to merge," said Kowalski, president of the parish council.

The parishioners also said they were working with a canon lawyer, but they declined to name the person.

"The lawyer has asked to work in anonymity for a while," Kowalski said.

Diocesan officials commented through a written statement that acknowledged "how difficult changes in parish life can be."

"Bishop Kmiec and our clergy continue to pray that parishioners involved in mergers will bring their talents, gifts and deep faith to their new parish communities, helping to contribute to a stronger, more vibrant Catholic Church," the statement reads.

Appealing a church closing is a relatively new phenomenon in the Catholic Church, which made appeals possible in its 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law.

But the process is not widely understood.

Parishes, for example, can't simply argue that the church is historic or architecturally significant.

"You can use that information, but only secondarily," said Sister Mary Kathleen Kuentler, a canon lawyer who has represented parishes where bishops planned to close church buildings. "There have to be some real canon law reasons about why the administrative process used by the bishop didn't meet the criteria of canon law."

Other acceptable arguments are that a closing would jeopardize the spiritual life of parishioners or that it would not represent good financial stewardship, said Kuentler.

Parishioners must start the appeal process by asking the bishop to reconsider his decision within 10 days of the closing decree.

At that point, the bishop must honor the appeal process, which proceeds to a mediation process and then to the Congregation for Clergy at the Vatican.

Parishioners also can appeal a denial by the Congregation for Clergy to the Apostolic Signatura, which is considered the Supreme Court of the Vatican.

"It's going to be a very costly process," said Suchocki, a parish trustee. "The parishioners are committed to doing it. We are doing this collectively as a parish family."

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