

Cardinal Sean O'Malley to sell 6 Massachusetts churches

By Associated Press

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The head of the Archdiocese of Boston has paved the way to sell six churches, including three where parishioners have been holding protest vigils since their parishes were closed in 2004.

The decision by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, announced Thursday after several weeks of "consultation, reflection and prayer," means the churches are no longer holy places, but secular buildings.

The church term for the move - "relegation for profane use" - means the churches can be sold and used for other purposes in line with Roman Catholic values, including as places of worship by other denominations, affordable housing or community centers.

The churches deconsecrated are St. James the Great in Wellesley; St. Jeanne D'Arc in Lowell; Star of the Sea in Quincy; Our Lady of Lourdes in Revere; St. Frances Xavier Cabrini in Scituate; and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Boston.

Vigils are still being held at the Wellesley, Scituate and East Boston churches.

O'Malley made the move after consulting with lay Catholics in an online survey, neighboring parishes, priests' councils and the archdiocese's finance council, and only after those who had opposed the closure of their parishes in 2004 had their appeals to the Vatican rejected.

"What I have heard from these consultations is that we have reached a point as a community of believers where we must relegate these church buildings as part of the continuing healing and rebuilding of the archdiocese," O'Malley said in a statement.

Church buildings sold by the archdiocese since 2004 have been used by other faiths, for housing and, infamously, by a photographer who quickly flipped the building for a \$1.8 million profit.

Peter Borre, co-chairman of the Council of Parishes, which formed to fight church closings, anticipated the Cardinal's decision and said the vigils will continue and the decision will be appealed to the Vatican, which has already reversed the decisions by some U.S. bishops to deconsecrate churches.

"We are deeply disappointed in the refusal of Cardinal O'Malley to take into account the landmark decision from the Congregation of Clergy ordering American bishops to open 12 parochial churches for Catholic worship," Borre said.

Jon Rogers, a parishioner at St. Frances X. Cabrini of Scituate who has spent countless nights in vigil at the church since October 2004, said he wasn't surprised by the

announcement and believed the archdiocese had always intended to "throw us out in the streets" so it could sell to churches to pay for the sexual abuse scandals.

He said parishioners have no intention of stopping vigils or giving up hope.

"We're going to ignore this ... as we have for about seven years," he said. "We are going to continue our process of appeals to the Vatican."

The Vatican earlier this year rejected the nearby Springfield Diocese's attempts to convert three churches to secular use, although it backed the decision to close the parishes.

Canon lawyers draw a distinction between a parish and a church. A parish is the people, while a church is the bricks-and-mortar building.

Fighting O'Malley's decision could mean it would be at least another two years before the archdiocese could put the buildings on the market, he said.

The Vatican recognizes that there is a resurgence of Catholicism in the U.S. driven by Latino immigration, and American bishops do not, Borre said.

"The bishops in their cocoons cannot see beyond the tips of their noses," Borre said. "The fight is on."

O'Malley also allowed two churches to remain open in different capacities. St. Therese in Everett will be allowed to stay open as an oratory, or place of worship for the Brazilian community of St. Anthony Parish.

Negotiations are ongoing to transfer control of St. Jeremiah in Framingham to the Syro-Malabar church, an East Syrian Rite in full communion with the Roman Catholic church.

All eight parishes had their appeals to reopen rejected last year by the Vatican's highest court.

The decision Thursday becomes effective Monday.

The Cardinal's move does not mean the archdiocese will be more aggressive in getting people holding vigils to leave.

"There's no plan to drag people out of church," archdiocese spokesman Terry Donilon said.

The archdiocese will continue its peaceful approach, said the Rev. Arthur Coyle, O'Malley's liaison for the relegation process and the Episcopal Vicar for the Merrimack Region.

"The Cardinal has shown remarkable patience over the last six or seven years," he said. "There have been ongoing discussions, outreach to these people. Once the final appeals were finished in the fall there was renewed outreach with all of these individuals to enter in dialogue again. In most cases these discussions are ongoing."

Just 300 people expressed opposition to the move in the online survey, Coyle said. The archdiocese has 1.8 million Catholics. About 150 supported the move.

"One person to whom I spoke basically said ... it's very painful to drive by the empty church and just see it sitting there, and it's been like a six-year wake," Coyle said.

The archdiocese in 2004 started a series of church closings in response to financial struggles, a shortage of priests and falling attendance, reducing the number of parishes from 357 to 290.

Some Catholics feared the archdiocese was closing churches to help pay for settlements in the clergy sex abuse scandal.

Church officials stressed that money made through the sale of churches would not be used to pay legal settlements, but would be placed in a fund to help other parishes. Stained-glass windows, sacred artifacts and other religious items that have not already been removed would also be made available to other parishes.
