

Vatican denies bid to keep Boston Catholic churches open

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c. 2012 Religion News Service BOSTON (RNS) Groups of Boston-area Catholics who have waged an eight-year battle to block the sale of parish buildings are running out of options as the Vatican has rejected their appeals.

In rulings dated March through May, Rome's Congregation for the Clergy upheld the Archdiocese of Boston's plans to convert six parish buildings from sacred to profane (non-church) use.

Now parishioners, including vigil keepers who've occupied two church buildings round-the-clock since a wave of parish closures began in 2004, must decide whether to appeal one more time to the Vatican's top court.

Five of the six groups are resolving to fight on, according to Peter Borre, co-founder of the Council of Parishes, which represents members of closed parishes. A sixth, St. Jeanne d'Arc in Lowell, has not yet decided on next steps, Borre said.

"We have lost at the second level," Borre said. "It is our right to go to the final appeal level, which is the Vatican supreme court. That's what five of the six have decided to do."

The Archdiocese of Boston, meanwhile, is renewing calls for vigils to end and for properties to be sold.

"We're in a new part of the process," said church spokesperson Terrence Donilon, noting that it costs as much as \$2 million per year to maintain the shuttered parishes. "We need to move on from this now... I can't tell you exactly how these (vigils) are going to end, but they're going to end."

The emotionally charged battle over parish buildings has roots in the abuse crisis. Groups of parishioners, livid over pedophile priests and the protection they received

from church leaders, resolved not to let church coffers be replenished from the sale of certain local parish assets. The Archdiocese has closed 69 parishes since 2004.

Those appealing have been encouraged by successes in other dioceses. In March, the Vatican ordered 13 Cleveland parishes re-opened. Plans for parish closures have also been overturned in Syracuse, N.Y., and Allentown, Pa.

Appellants are keeping vigil in two of Boston's priciest suburbs, Wellesley and Scituate, where facilities stand to fetch millions on the open market. The Archdiocese has a deal to sell St. James the Great for \$3.8 million to the town of Wellesley, which plans to make it into a recreation facility. But the deal won't be consummated until the appeal process is complete and the parish's vigil ends, according to Donilon.

Final Vatican decisions are expected in late 2012 or 2013.