

St. Stan's faces threat to works of art - North Adams Transcript

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ADAMS -- As vigil members sit bundled in the pews of St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, ticking off the days to the vigil's one-year anniversary on Saturday, Dec. 26, they are surrounded by reminders that their parish has a history of challenging the decrees issued by the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchy.

When Vatican II stripped religious statues and paintings from Catholic churches in the 1960s, St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish held tight to its ornate 30-foot-tall altar, its statue of St. Faustina Kowalska, the hand-carved Stations of the Cross brought over from Bavaria, and refused to white-wash the dramatic paintings that cover the ceilings and walls. Over 40 years later, the church's remaining parishioners -- some 200 faithful vigil members -- are once again fighting to keep their heritage and statuary intact as the Diocese of Springfield moves forward with plans to strip the church of all its religious trappings -- from its paintings and statues to its altar, pews, chandeliers and organ.

"How can you just get rid of these beautiful items?," Helen Krzeminski asked on Tuesday as she sat vigil at the church. "It's like a basilica in here. Father John [Chwalek] wouldn't let them take our statues out back then, so why should we let them take ours now? Our statue of St. Faustina of the Divine Mercy was one of the first in the diocese." On Tuesday, parishioners sent their appeal of the church's closing to the Apostolic

Signatura, the Vatican's highest court -- a move they hope will stall the removal of religious items from the church. Until recently, the group was satisfied to have the appeal, filed this spring, in front of the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome. The court had given itself until Nov. 25 to rule on the matter but has not communicated with the group since giving itself an extension in August.

"We still have not heard anything official from the Congregation for the Clergy, but we were notified through our canon lawyer, Advocate Carlo Gullo, in Rome, that the Congregation for the Clergy gave themselves another 90-day extension," Laurie Haas, spokeswoman for the Friends of St. Stan's, said in an e-mail on Tuesday.

She said the group was advised by Gullo that the appeal should be moved to a higher court in response to the bishop's decree.

"From what I understand, when the other closed parishes from the Diocese of Boston filed their appeals before the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, the Signatura within the initial first months, issued a decree directing the archbishop of Boston to safeguard the goods of the parish while the recourse is pending," she said. "St. Stan's desires to achieve these same objectives."

Haas said the move is beneficial -- the Apostolic Signatura will consider whether or not St. Stan's should have been closed. The Congregation for the Clergy was set only to decide if the diocese's plan for closing was flawed.

"They will examine our strengths as a parish and look at our viability," she said. "It's a completely different focus, which should work toward our advantage. Especially considering that St. Stanislaus Kostka is an extraordinarily viable parish on every level."

However the process can be lengthy -- the Apostolic Signatura consists of two levels, the Congressio and the Plenary. Each level takes from 18 to 24 months to make a decision.

The parishioners' appeal comes on the heels of a decree issued by the Most Rev. Timothy McDonnell, bishop of the Diocese of Springfield, on Nov. 27, which calls for the "sacred objects and vessels, along with any statuary or other religious ornamentation, vestments and such to be disposed of" and desanctifies the church building and its land. The group has 60 days to appeal the decree.

"I think they have the right to remove the items while we are here, but I don't think they'll try to do it -- it would be too much bad press for them," Henry "Hank" Tomkowicz said Tuesday during his vigil shift at the church. Tomkowicz sang in the choir during the church's 11:15 a.m. Mass, which has been spoken in Polish for 25 years.

For those sitting vigil, the church isn't just a building, nor are the statues and paintings just items on a wall -- they're pieces of their history, part of their families and their homes.

"The Black Madonna was one of Father John's most prized items," Krzeminski said, pointing to a painting of the Virgin Mary. "He brought it over from Poland. He asked every family to donate a jewel to decorate it so it would look just like the one in Poland. We did what we could, but almost every family has a jewel on that painting."

Tomkowicz said he isn't ready to give up on his church, even if the diocese tells him it's no longer a sacred place for worship.

"I feel like I'm hanging in there," he said. "I was brought up here and I'm still going. The worst thing you can do is do nothing. I remember where I was sitting a year ago when Father Dan [Boyle] came into the church just before midnight and asked us what we were still doing here. I guess this is my life now -- this and sporting events."

Vigil members have kept watch on the church around the clock for nearly a year -- a pile of air mattresses, sleeping bags and cots tucked away in a back room are rolled out nightly for those who brave the cold nights -- the heat is kept at 55 degrees.

Otherwise, not much seems to have changed inside the church -- the traditional manger scene has been set up in the front right-hand corner, and preparations are being made for the annual delivery of poinsettias. Rosary devotions are still held on a weekly basis, as is the walking of the Stations of the Cross.

Tomkowicz said the parishioners -- many who have not seen each other in months -- will unite in the church's Kolby Hall on Sunday, Dec. 27, at 2 p.m. to sing Christmas carols and share food.

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