

## Vatican halts closing of 3 Mass. parishes

*Springfield diocese decision overruled*

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In a rare victory for Catholics challenging parish closings, the Vatican has rejected an effort by the Diocese of Springfield to end worship at three churches in Western Massachusetts.

Church officials in Rome ruled that the Springfield Diocese did not adequately justify its decision to close two churches in Chicopee, St. Patrick and St. George, and a third in Adams, St. Stanislaus Kostka. In Adams, parishioners have held an around-the-clock vigil for more than two years.

The rulings are being closely examined in Greater Boston, where scores of Catholics have been occupying - and continuing to pray in - five closed parishes for as long as six years. The Springfield ruling follows similar Vatican rulings on church closings in Allentown, Pa.

"After seven years, we have scored a major win," said Peter Borre of the Council of Parishes, which has contested church closings in the Boston area. "I believe this is a landmark ruling."

Neither church officials nor the aggrieved worshipers in Western Massachusetts were clear yesterday about what would happen next. The Vatican said that Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell of Springfield acted appropriately in deciding to close or merge the parishes as legal units of the diocese, but not in converting the church buildings from religious to secular use. Supporters of the closed parishes suggested that perhaps they could continue to pray in the church buildings, but the buildings could be overseen by other existing parishes or directly by the diocese.

Mark Dupont, a spokesman for the Springfield Diocese, said canon lawyers are reviewing the Adams decision, but had not received rulings regarding the two Chicopee parishes. He declined to comment on how church officials would proceed, or whether they would contest the decision with a Vatican appeals court.

In Chicopee and Adams, parishioners said they were thrilled by the decision.

"It's marvelous," said Margaret Page, a parishioner at St. Patrick Parish in Chicopee Falls. "We are all very happy with the decision and hope it leads to our parish reopening."

The church, where Page said some 4,000 families worshiped, was closed in November 2009. The appeal was filed last January.

In a press release, parishioners in Adams said the decision "overturns the decree that resulted in the canonical closing of our church," but acknowledged that diocese officials had wide latitude in how to implement it.

"Over 200 parishioners of St. Stan's have been in a 24/7 peaceful and prayerful vigil since Dec. 26, 2008," said the statement, signed by Laurie Haas of Adams. "We look forward to a respectful dialogue with Bishop McDonnell in an effort to bring our vigil to a conclusion and to reopen St. Stan's church in a manner that will best serve the interests of the Catholic Community of Adams, as well as the Diocese of Springfield."

The Diocese of Springfield has moved to consolidate the number of churches amid declining attendance and financial difficulties. The Vatican concluded that the diocese followed a thorough procedure in consolidating parishes, but did not provide the "necessary grave motivations" to close the church.

The ruling was so difficult to interpret that parishioners could not determine whether it had found in their favor until they consulted lawyers.

Rachel Bradford - a parishioner at St George in Chicopee, which closed in November 2009 - said she was thrilled by the decision, yet aware it did not guarantee that the church would return to the way it was.

