

Church talk continues in Adams

Parishioners keep dialogue going

By Ryan Hutton

NORTH ADAMS TRANSCRIPT

ADAMS — Hundreds of people were on hand at St. Thomas Aquinas on Thursday night to fire questions and accusations at Monsignor John Bonzagni over the closings of both St. Stanislaus Kostka and St. Thomas by Jan. 1.

"The bottom line is, there are going to be changes on Jan. 1 and we need to get ready for them," Bonzagni told the crowd.

All night, Bonzagni, head of the pastoral planning committee, had questions being lobbed at him from both those who raised their hand and those that blurted out. He explained that the Bishop's decision to save Notre Dame from the ax came from needing one parish in one set of buildings with the most seating capacity available in town. He said despite what has been claimed about addition seating in St. Stan's, the balconies were never designed to carry many people for extended periods of time. He also pointed out that if one parish was to be saved, it had to be one that was centrally located.

"We were also looking for a prominent location," Bonzagni said. "Notre Dame is too prominent to abandon."

This incited a round of "boos" and "No's" from the crowd.

Resident Jim Loughman questioned the "utilitarian value" of Notre Dame's location with St. Stan's just a quarter mile away.

"There is obviously a proud tradition in this town of different churches," Bonzagni said. "There's Irish, Italian, French and Polish. In its heyday there were 12 priests wandering around Adams. Those days aren't coming back. But what we have now is the



Caroline Bonnivier/Berkshire Eagle

Walter Mikutowicz listens to Monsignor John Bonzagni at the church in Adams. Mikutowicz is a life-long parishioner of St. Stan's, having been baptized there 82 years ago.

opportunity to begin something new."

Several people questioned the economic feasibility of keeping Notre Dame going in the coming months and years, fearing it would close too if it couldn't sustain itself.

"We made two promise when this process began," Bonzagni said. "The first is that no parish would be closed because the finances were poor and second was no parish would be saved because its finances were in good order: It's about location and giving everyone in the area fair and equitable access to the Eucharist."

He said that between 2001 and 2007, only eight of the diocese's 118 parishes were in the black,

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Caroline Bonnivier/Berkshire Eagle

Peter Gutmann, a Notre Dame parishioner, emphatically makes his point to the crowd and to Monsignor John Bonzagni at the church in Adams.



Caroline Bonnavier/Berkshire Eagle

Monsignor John Bonzagni speaks to parishioners at the church in Adams.

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partly because there were only 65 reliable priests to work them. However, he did say the church was committed to keeping a presence in Adams.

"I wish we were as Machiavellian as people think," he said. "No, we have no plans to drag every priest kicking and screaming out of Adams."

Some questioned what they called the callous rush to close the churches, seeing as how the announcements of the closings came in August and would be effective six months later.

"There's no rush. But the diocese has decided there is no point in a protracted wait. What would have been a time you recommend?"

Answers ranged from five years to 10 years to never as Bonzagni continued to field hostile questions — so much so that he joked the second glass of water he was brought was actually gin.

Many parishioners also expressed displeasure that the decision to close their parish seemed to have come from the top down and they had no say in it.

"We had lay representatives at the meetings where people were allowed to give their input," Bonzagni said. "If they didn't use that time well, that's not the fault of the process. If they went in there thinking they were invincible, that's not the fault of the process... This was not a knee-jerk reaction made in the dead of night. Those listening sessions were not designed to make decisions but for people to give input."

St. Thomas parishioner Philip Grandchamp pointed out that in all the bickering and arguing over which church was going to close, Fr. Daniel Boyle was often getting the short end of the blame stick.

"I feel very sorry for Fr. Boyle and the people that have focused personal grievances on him for the closings," he said. "It's unfortunate and shouldn't be tolerated."

Bonzagni said that not only shouldn't it be tolerated but, in fact, was a sin.

"Fr. Boyle is not responsible in this," he said. "People who have attacked him by letter to the editor need to rethink Christian Charity because some of what has been said is slanderous and has no place

in the Catholic Church. There is a Church law against 'inciting scandal'. It is crime and a sin. It can't be enforced because the Swiss Guard isn't going to come over here and do it but still."

While the debate raged on for hours, one man who stood without identifying himself, asked the people to question why they were bickering and fighting with themselves and Bonzagni.

"I was in the seminary for a time and I'm still active in the church, specifically teaching the confirmation classes," he said. "The one thing I tell those being confirmed is that you are not being confirmed into a parish but into the Diocese of Springfield. We are united under the Springfield Diocese and it is hurting now. The Berkshires have been immune to the changes for a long time.

"Now this bickering and infighting is pulling it apart. People have come here tonight to see if they can trip (Bonzagni) up. How do we know this isn't the will of the divine and these are the visual effects of His will? We need to go home, get on our knees and ask 'Am I doing the right thing?'"