

[Closing of St. Emeric marks end of Cleveland Catholic Diocese downsizing](#)

Published: Monday, June 28, 2010, 10:00 AM Updated: Monday, June 28, 2010, 1:32 PM



Michael O'Malley, The Plain Dealer

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Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

A list of hymns for the last Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church can be seen at the entrance Sunday. The final Mass will be said at 4 p.m. Wednesday when the West Side church will close. It is the last of 50 Catholic churches in Northeast Ohio to close during downsizing.

With Robert L. Smith

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- It has been 15 months since Bishop Richard Lennon announced he was closing dozens of parishes in the Cleveland Catholic Diocese, sounding a death knell for mostly urban churches built long ago by people coming to a New World.

Week after week, Lennon, in the company of armed police, has presided over church closings throughout the eight-county diocese, saying final Masses and performing rituals to "desanctify" the holy places so they can be sold on the open real estate market.

On Wednesday, the bishop will close the last of 50 churches -- St. Emeric, a Hungarian parish established 106 years ago on Cleveland's near West Side. St. James in Lakewood closed on Saturday; St. Mary in Akron closed Sunday.

The closing of St. Emeric, which held its last Hungarian Mass on Sunday, signals an end to a downsizing that the bishop has said was necessary because of Catholics leaving the city, a shortage of priests and dwindling collection-basket cash.

It is the first downsizing in the history of the 163-year-old diocese. And Lennon, who closed churches in Boston before coming here four years ago, hopes it's the last.

"He did not want to come back in five or even 10 years and do this process again," said diocese spokesman Robert Tayek. "It's too difficult. The expectation is we will not have to go through this again in the near future."

Previous bishop's work unraveled

The closing of so many inner-city parishes -- about 70 percent of the 50 -- unraveled the work of Lennon's predecessor, Bishop Anthony Pilla, whose "Church in the City" program toiled for years to preserve urban parishes, calling on the entire diocese for help.

Pilla declined to comment on the closings. Tayek said Lennon was too busy last week to be interviewed.

Before the closings, the diocese had 224 parishes. The greatest number of losses were in the hearts of Cleveland, Akron and Lorain, followed by inner-ring suburbs like Lakewood and Euclid

Leah Gary of Rocky River, a member of the closed St. Peter in downtown Cleveland, said her heart sank when she recently drove by the empty St. Cecilia Church in Cleveland's Mount Pleasant neighborhood, one of the poorest sections of the city.

"I said to myself, 'Oh, my God, it's St. Cecilia's and it's all boarded up.' It just broke my heart to think that the Catholic Church is adding to the blight of the neighborhood."

Tayek said aid to the poor will be taken up by urban churches that survived and through charity programs operated by the diocese. A portion of money raised by a capital campaign the diocese plans to launch in the fall would go to programs for the poor, he said.

Hugs and tears ... and protests

Closing Masses in urban landmark churches were usually packed with people, many of whom had moved away from the neighborhoods and were no longer members of the parishes but came back for the memories.



Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer
A tearful Eszti Pigniczky, troopmaster for Hungarian Scout Troop 34, kneels in prayer during the final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church on Cleveland's West Side Sunday. Bishop Richard Lennon will conduct the closing Mass at 4 p.m. Wednesday. It will mark the 50th and final church to close as part of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese downsizing.

Inside echoing chambers of classic structures, there were hugs and tears, while outside, groups of protesters carried posters vilifying the bishop. A couple of times worshippers in the pews shouted their anger at Lennon on the altar.

Throughout such dramas, the bishop insisted that the Catholic Church was its people, not its buildings, a notion rejected by protesters.

Colleen O'Shaughnessy of Westlake, who carries an Irish flag at weekly protests outside St. Casimir, a boarded-up Polish church on Cleveland's East Side, said Lennon, an outsider from Boston, had no right to destroy Cleveland's history.

"I'm so sick of hearing that these historical churches are just bricks and mortar," she said. "So is St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, one of the most beautiful churches in the world. Should we tear that down too? Let's tear down the Pyramids while we're at it."

But Pat Ludwa of Euclid, a member of St. William, which merged with the closed St. Robert, said Lennon had no choice but to close churches, many of which were too empty of parishioners and too costly to maintain and repair.

"I can well understand why Bishop Lennon is not too well liked," said Ludwa. "But I think he did the best he could. If he had just let things go, that would have been really irresponsible.

"It doesn't do anyone any good if you've got a lot of churches and few being served. It's better to try to consolidate and make it a more vibrant body. Churches live and die like everything else."

With the death of St. Emeric on Wednesday, the largest Hungarian-speaking community in North America will lose its faith and cultural center. The church complex behind the West Side Market hosted a Hungarian language school, cultural banquets and a busy Hungarian Scouting program.

Angry Catholics meet, protest

Less than a month after Lennon announced his sweeping downsizing plan, a small group of angry Catholics from 10 parishes met at the Episcopal Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland to form a protest group called Endangered Catholics.



Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

The Rev. Shandor Siklodi gives communion to Ann Gyorky during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday.

The group eventually grew to represent 14 parishes, including St. Emeric. They held weekly protests outside the diocese headquarters downtown and appealed to the Vatican in Rome to overturn Lennon's closings. About a dozen appeals are pending.

"We were so hopeful," said Nancy McGrath of Akron, whom the diocese threatened with arrest when she refused to leave a church after a final Mass. "We were convinced we would prevail and save churches.

"We knew it was a David and Goliath situation, but we thought David had a chance. We soon recognized David never had a chance against the Roman Catholic Church. It's too big, too powerful, too wealthy."

McGrath predicted the closings will force a significant number of Catholics to abandon their faith.

Tayek disagreed. "Yes, some left, of course, but not in any great numbers," he said, adding that if Catholics leave the faith because of church closings, "I'm not sure where they were in their faith to begin with."

"The whole premise was to build a stronger, more vibrant church," said Tayek. "We are finding that starting to take place."

Throughout the protests, the diocese emphasized that out of 750,000 Catholics in the diocese, only a small number engaged in public dissent. One of the largest protests -- about 300 people -- was held outside St. Patrick in Cleveland's West Park neighborhood when it closed last month.

Pat Singleton, a member of St. Patrick and president of Endangered Catholics, said thousands of people throughout the diocese signed petitions asking Lennon to keep churches open.

"People are more displeased with him than he thinks," she said.

Diocesan priests remain silent

Noticeably silent during the closings were the diocese's priests, with the exception of the Rev. Bob Begin, whose church, St. Colman on Cleveland's West Side, was one of two that Lennon initially ordered closed but then spared.

In March, Begin shared with the media a letter he wrote to Lennon. "I wish to make it clear to the people of our diocese that my own public silence on this matter and that of many other priests is not a silence that has agreed with your decisions," Begin wrote.

Despite criticism, protests, petitions and appeals, Lennon pressed on.

One by one, following final Masses -- "the Mass of Eviction," to protesters -- church doors were padlocked, stained-glass windows were covered with plywood and Deacon Jim Armstrong, assistant to Lennon, stepped in to liquidate sacred artifacts and church buildings.

"Our plan is not to tear down any churches, if possible," said Tayek.

So far, the diocese has 24 churches for sale, collectively listed at \$15 million. It has already sold two. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in sacred artifacts like altars, gold-plated chalices, statues and stained-glass windows are being sold online.

Protesters, citing church law, say the diocese cannot sell or distribute assets of churches that have pending appeals in Rome. That includes St. Adalbert, St. Peter, St. Emeric, St. Barbara, St. Casimir, St. Patrick, St. Wendelin, all in Cleveland; St. Stanislaus in Lorain; Sacred Heart in Akron; St. James in Lakewood; and St. Mary in Bedford.

"It's not over yet," said Singleton. "We're still fighting."



[Enlarge](#) **Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer**

Fr. Shandor Siklodi gives communion to Ann Gyorky during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. Bishop Richard Lennon will conduct the closing mass this Wednesday at 4 p.m. It will mark the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)

A set of 8 photos and captions continue below, followed by comments from the Cleveland Community as of June 28 10:30 pm.

Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church gallery (8 photos)



Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

Posted: Sunday, June 27, 2010, 7:55 PM



Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

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Icons are lit on the darkened altar before the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. The last mass will be Wednesday, marking the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



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Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

Posted: Sunday, June 27, 2010, 7:55 PM



Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

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Tamas Csajka and other members of the Hungarian Scouts during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. Bishop Richard Lennon will conduct the closing mass this Wednesday at 4 p.m. It will mark the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

Posted: Sunday, June 27, 2010, 7:55 PM



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A list of Hungarian hymns on a dry erase board to be sung during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio.(Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

Posted: Sunday, June 27, 2010, 7:55 PM



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Mihaly Vamos, holds the cross as he waits to lead the procession during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. Bishop Richard Lennon will conduct the closing mass this Wednesday at 4 p.m. It will mark the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

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John Gyorky snuggles up to his mother, Ann, during the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. Gyorky was comforting his mother who had been crying. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



Final Hungarian Mass at St. Emeric Church

Posted: Sunday, June 27, 2010, 7:55 PM



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An elderly parishioner makes her way into St. Emeric Church before the final Hungarian mass Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. Bishop Richard Lennon will conduct the closing mass this Wednesday at 4 p.m. It will mark the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)



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Icons are lit on the darkened altar before the final Hungarian mass at St. Emeric Church Sunday, June 27, 2010, in Cleveland, Ohio. The last mass will be Wednesday, marking the 50th and final church to close as part of the Diocese downsizing. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)

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Mary June 28, 2010 at 9:12PM

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Where is Bishop Lennon? Does he ever speak to the press? Does he ever communicate to the members of the Diocese of Cleveland? Why does he have armed body guards accompany him to the final masses in the churches that are being closed? Questions, questions and more questions surround this mysterious bishop. Obviously the members of the Cleveland Diocese revile him. Only one priest, Father Robert Begin, had the courage to speak up. Where will he go after he has finished destroying the religious and cultural history our parents and grandparents built. Will he go to Rome? I've been to Rome and there are many old churches there. Is he rubbing his hands together with glee as he plans the closing of their ancient churches? Why is he too busy to talk to the press? Is he afraid? Who is paying the Diocesan spokesman Robert Tayek's salary? Does it coming from the sale of the churches? Good luck to the parishes that have appealed to Rome. If the belated response to the pedophile scandal is any example of the Vatican in action it will take a miracle to receive a timely and sensible response. God bless the people who have lost their churches. We need dedicated people to help bring about much needed changes in the hierarchy within our Roman Catholic Church. People are the body of the church. The head cannot survive without the body.

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bobkraussr June 28, 2010 at 4:36PM

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Worship is no longer a priority with many people who claim that they are members of the catholic church.

It is my conservative guess that less than 50% of the registered members of St Sebastian Parish attend Mass on Sat-Sun. As far as I know the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday still exists . . . more than 50% of the members of our parish ignore it.

r m kraus/akron

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Rome, ohio June 28, 2010 at 4:27PM

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It's amazing to read all the criticisms on Bishop Lennon and the Catholic Church. To the one who was not able to be confirmed-- That's a shame for you. You allowed that one event to give you a reason to stop practicing your faith. I don't understand why you blame the church for that, though. I would think you might hold it against your father for not taking you to church on Sundays. You know, every kind of group or club or school has rules for entering and remaining a member. If you don't obey the rules, you might get a couple chances to straighten up before you get kicked out. The Catholic Church, like a loving parent, allows its members to make mistakes over and over and try again. You don't ever get kicked out, you kick yourself out.

Rules are rules. If you don't like 'em, you know where the door is. Should the Church change its rules because some people don't agree?

As members of the Church, we voluntarily agree to follow our leaders: parish priests, bishops, and the Pope. Currently, the entire Church the world over, is experiencing a purge. The numbers are dwindling, as has been predicted; however, it's better to have fewer, stronger and more loyal members, than to have many who are so weak they can't follow their Leader. Those who are dissenting are playing right into the Devil's hands. That's just what he wants, is to see a lot of bickering among the "ranks."

When men and women join the military, they have to learn to follow orders, whether they understand them or not; to obey their leader. Anyone who can't take it gets weeded out. Did you ever think that that's what is happening now, that those who aren't going to follow orders like a good soldier, are being weeded out of the Church?? Most people admire anyone in the armed forces. Those of us Catholics who choose to follow orders without stamping our foot like a spoiled child, are being ridiculed. That's called persecution.

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rc100 June 28, 2010 at 3:18PM

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Well now that his task of closing these churches is almost complete, I wonder if Chowder Head will go back to Boston?

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Bob June 28, 2010 at 2:21PM

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Tayek disagreed. "Yes, some left, of course, but not in any great numbers," he said, adding that if Catholics leave the faith because of church closings, "I'm not sure where they were in their faith to begin with." And . . . "The whole premise was to build a stronger, more vibrant church," said Tayek. "We are finding that starting to take place."

Mr. Tayek is guessing. He has no idea what numbers he is talking about. No one knows where most of those who belonged at these closed churches have gone. Not the bishop, not the former pastors, and certainly not Bob Tayek.

And he is overstepping his bounds, his job description, and any sense of respect he might claim toward his fellow Catholics with a remark about where parishioners were "in their faith to begin with."

That is shameful, Mr. Tayek. You have had a front row seat in every closing and you still fail to appreciate the loss these people feel. Do you presume to be a standard bearer of faith, omniscient enough to measure the faith of people who used to be in the churches that have been closed. You are correct, Bob, when you say "I'm not sure where they were". You should have stopped there.

". . . build a stronger, more vibrant Church." Mr. Tayek, I was starting to see that take place in many of the churches that were thriving under our previous bishop. Many, though not all, were maintaining or growing until they were discarded.

Bishop Lennon has paved paradise to build parking lots. He ran a program that had all the appearances of dialogue and discernment when, in fact, the outcomes were predetermined. If the cluster decisions did not line up with his wishes, he simply reversed them. He holds all the authority, and he will bear all the shame for this long funeral procession of urban and ethnic churches declared "unworthy" by a bishop who was here for a year.

Mr. Tayek, you have misspoken, you have offended, and you have betrayed your communion with us by your comments. An apology would be appropriate.

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phwarrior June 28, 2010 at 5:13PM

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Mr. Tayek is about as out of touch with what is happening in his own diocese as is the hatchet man from Boston. I wonder if it was Tayek who was spying on the masses at St. Emeric. coming in late, grabbing a bulleting and leaving early. Nothing more than the bosses henchman.

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ostrc June 28, 2010 at 7:55PM

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You said it quite eloquently. I was very offended by the remarks of Mr. Tayek. It is the same attitude and lack of pastoral decency that led many Eastern Rite Catholics to leave the church in the early twentieth century in response to the arrogant, insulting, and finally non-canonical behavior of another bishop, John Ireland.

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sjosephs June 28, 2010 at 2:41PM

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Wish I could have said it as eloquently as you Bob.

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bena55 June 28, 2010 at 1:58PM

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I see where Belgium is getting tough with the RCC..It's about time that the innocent childred are

put in first place.....I could say more but.....

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DavidG33 June 28, 2010 at 1:17PM

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I was an alter boy for 4 years at St Stephen's in Cleveland's westside. I served mass 2-3 times per week in the mornings, mostly in the convent temple. My catholic school/parish decided not to confirm me as I rarely attended the Sunday services due to having to visit my father who had visitation rights on the weekends.

I went from a devout catholic to a kid who felt he had been excommunicated. It's been over 20 years since all this happened, and I am a happily married father now with several children. We are very spiritual, but due to my experiences, I will not subject my children to the same type of scenarios or situations.

The church today is more political then spiritual and I think its showing as its slowly dwindling to nothing.

I see the non confirmation as a blessing now. It gave me a stronger connection to God and taught me that I don't need a bunch of hypocrites to worship with to know God and know love and to be a caring and spiritual person.

I guess I am saying all this to say that these Church's have done this to themselves. When you drive a single parishioner off instead of nurturing them and helping them to keep their faith eventually you will have not lost just one, but several, in numbers growing exponentially.

If my children and the families they end up raising go back to the catholic faith on their own I will be very surprised.

It's a shame to see the schools go as I imagine most of them are good schools. I attended catholic schools from 1-9 and I appreciate the education I received.

I guess I will be labeled a bad christian for not attending services every Sunday. I am just glad that the God of my understanding see's differently.

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sjosephs June 28, 2010 at 2:48PM

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You're still a good catholic boy in my book. Damn shame that happened. Hopefully, you find a good church to go to, even if it's catholic. Better hurry, they're closing them by the hour!

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phwarrior June 28, 2010 at 1:10PM

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While sadness descends on the Cleveland Hungarian community with the closing of St Emeric's Church, what is far worse is the shameful deception under which this bishop closed this center of Hungarian life in Cleveland.

While we heard over and over again, that urban ethnic churches have dwindling attendance and can no longer contribute as much to the coffers of the diocese, thereby becoming a liability, this was not the case with St. Emeric. This parish was fully self-sustained with all of its building in good repair despite the fact that the church is 106 years old. Even the priest was here from Transylvania as an unpaid guest of the diocese. What is not widely known is that an elderly widow had left a large sum of money to the church with the hopes of keeping it alive. Operating St. Emeric's did not cost the Cleveland diocese one dime, but the endowment must have looked pretty appealing to this dictatorial bishop. Perhaps an investigation should be made into the real motive for this closure.

This parish served as the hub of Hungarian life in the greater Cleveland community, housing the Hungarian school, the boy's and girl's scouting troops, and the Hungarian dance troupe. Now these organizations have been callously thrown into the street and for what purpose? Continuing to keep St. Emeric's open wouldn't have cost the diocese anything, but with a large six figure endowment that could be appropriated, it made for an appealing target.

Today, I am sad and ashamed to call myself a Catholic of this diocese especially after the cold-hearted threats and treatment coming from the corner of East Ninth and Superior. I for one, will never contribute another dollar to the diocese as long as Richard Lennon occupies the cathedra.

Hungarians have had to overcome the impact of another Lenin in history, and they will overcome the impact of this one as well.

Isten áld meg a Magyarot!

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John H. Tidyman June 28, 2010 at 12:35PM

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"Throughout such dramas, the bishop insisted that the Catholic Church was its people, not its buildings, a notion rejected by protesters."

He might have added it's not Purgatory, Limbo, beatification, miracles, stigmata, or any of the other myths and voodoo. And he'd be right. That revolutionary Jew preached the simplest rule: Love one another. Catholics who seek to practice their faith don't need a diocese, a criminal enterprise of priests, or a former Nazi in the Vatican. Heck, they don't even need the Vatican.

"The whole premise was to build a stronger, more vibrant church," said Tayek. "We are finding that starting to take place."

Where have I heard that before ... oh, yeah: "We had to destroy the village in order to save it."

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metropark1 June 28, 2010 at 11:32AM

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so much has happened since Christs birth and resurrection to the Church body and it's human governance...from the inquisition to the buying and selling of favors and holy relics and the relative quiet againts nazism during world war 2....and the ongoing abuse scandal....

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hwiman11 June 28, 2010 at 11:10AM

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Re This article that appeared in the PD 6/28/10. Again our illustrious Bishop has talked down to the faithful, as a father reprimanding a child. Mr Tayek, diocese spokesman has a direct quote from the BISHOP," He did not want to come back five or even10 years and do this again"." Its too difficult. The expectation is we will not have to go through this again in the near future . This statement gives the impression that Lennon will be watching, and if things are not going his way he will be back! Also who is we? If and when the Bishop leaves Cleveland I would hope that he would take a course in Inter Personal Relationships, so that the members of the next Diocese might be spared the heavy handed approach he has cast upon the Cleveland Diocese, with no consideration for the feelings of the Parishioners



paradisoeh June 28, 2010 at 10:57AM

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Tayek disagreed. "Yes, some left, of course, but not in any great numbers," he said, adding that if Catholics leave the faith because of church closings, "I'm not sure where they were in their faith to begin with."

This is a pretty presumptuous quote...the parishioners of these closed churches have more of a right to question the faith of Lennon and his cronies.

What is sad is that Cleveland, unlike the characterless exurbs, had something worth keeping -- namely, these beautiful, historic churches, which, while often in blighted neighborhoods, were for the most part being maintained by the parishioners and self-sufficient. For example, St. Emeric (Szent Imre) was a net contributor to the diocese and its priest was from Hungary, so it's not like they were draining scarce resources.

Pretty soon, Cleveland will be no different than the countless Sun Belt bedroom and retirement communities. People will only realize this when it's too late.

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ostrc June 28, 2010 at 7:44PM

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You're absolutely right! This urban abandonment affects all Clevelanders and not just members of the parish.

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There are good ships
if there are wood at
e ships that sail the
best ships, are fine
it may they always

irish35 June 28, 2010 at 10:47AM

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Nothing seems the same anymore. What a shame !

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davejo June 28, 2010 at 10:30AM

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Of the 2 that were sold, what happened to them? In general, what is the expectation for future use? Mostly worship spaces for other denominations? other thoughts? I think Mausoleums would be a great use.

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nrwm June 28, 2010 at 11:52AM

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Coming Soon:
St. Emericks Ribs and Wings

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rpuck1 June 28, 2010 at 10:28AM

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lets talk about the good news.....

300 priest serving 175 parishes...800,000 catholics

200 schools

serving 300,000 with 3m meals annually

shelters with 70,000 nights available

while the closing were needed the future is bright....

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ostrc June 28, 2010 at 7:40PM

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I don't dispute the good works of the church. That is why I remain a Catholic and am proud to be one. However, attempting to gloss over the arrogant and disrespectful behavior of Bishop Lennon towards our communities by citing the works of lay people, the priesthood, and religious orders entirely misses the point.

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Bob June 28, 2010 at 2:01PM

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I would be happy to talk about the good news were the scandal of all these closings not such a distraction. A year from now, when this bishop is gone, and his legacy of boarded up windows, padlocked doors, and disenfranchised Catholics remains to stare us all in the face, there will not be enough good news to reconcile this disaster.

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Billie Thomas June 28, 2010 at 10:42AM

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even more good news....

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2_jeA8uQw8

the future looks bleak.

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rpuck1 June 28, 2010 at 11:48AM
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while you focus on the past....I'm thinking of the bright future of our national spelling bee champ from ICW.....

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johnwilley June 28, 2010 at 10:22AM
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Who closed more churches:

Lennon or Lenin?

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lazyredfox June 28, 2010 at 10:19AM
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Mr. O'Malley

Your headline needs some tweaking. St Mary's in Akron appears to be the last Parrish closing in the Cleveland Diocese. This will occur the July 4th weekend. It will close and merge with St Bernard and becomes St Bernard - St Mary's

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Fearlessleader June 28, 2010 at 10:15AM
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The job will be complete when all the r.c. churches are closed down.

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OldRuss June 28, 2010 at 10:08AM

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Oliver Cromwell didn't ravage the Catholic churches of Ireland with any more dispatch than has Bishop Lennon here in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.

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ostrc June 28, 2010 at 7:34PM

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Well put!!