



Hungarian government joins battle to save St. Emeric's Catholic Church

By Michael O'Malley, The Plain Dealer

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, joining a battle to save a Hungarian Catholic church on Cleveland's West Side, has brought out a big gun: the Hungarian government.

Kucinich met this week with an aide to Hungarian Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai to discuss St. Emeric church, a 105-year-old parish near the West Side Market that has been ordered closed as part of the downsizing by the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

The meeting was a follow-up to a meeting Kucinich had with the prime minister in December, when the congressman urged the Hungarian government to appeal St. Emeric's closing to the Vatican in Rome.

The aide, David Koranyi, this week told the Cleveland Democrat that the government has appealed.

"It shows that our community has an international reach," said Kucinich who described St. Emeric as a "spiritual and cultural treasure."

The ethnic church which has more than 600 registered members, is one of 50 casualties in the ongoing downsizing of the eight-county diocese. Bishop Richard Lennon has decreed that St. Emeric's will be shuttered June 30.

Lennon has already closed St. Margaret of Hungary in Orange Village, though he is keeping open St. Elizabeth of Hungary on Buckeye Road in Cleveland.

"I recognize how difficult it may be for the parishioners of St. Emeric and St. Margaret Mary of Hungary to leave their parishes," Lennon wrote to the churches' pastors in March. "However, I sincerely believe that these parishioners will be welcomed at St. Elizabeth of Hungary."

The Rev. Sandor Siklodi of Transylvania has been pastor of St. Emeric for 24 years. He said Thursday he has no idea where he will go after the church closes.

"We're hoping for a miracle," he said.

Bela Szombati, the Hungarian ambassador to the U.S., told The Plain Dealer Thursday that Bajnai sent his appeal letter to Rome in December, shortly after meeting with Kucinich. Szombati said the government has not yet received a response.



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U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich.

"We understand the difficulties of the Catholic church, but this church, St. Emeric, is of special significance to the Hungarian community in Cleveland," Szombati said in a telephone interview from his office in Washington, D.C. "It's a significant place of worship and a significant place of gathering for Hungarians."

A spokesman for the Cleveland diocese said it only learned of the Hungarian government's appeal on Thursday from a Plain Dealer reporter and had no immediate comment.

St. Emeric celebrates Masses in both Hungarian and English. It has Hungarian language classes and various cultural programs.

Parishioner Miklos Peller of Westlake, who has also filed an appeal with Rome, said Thursday he had heard through emails from Hungary that the government was going to appeal, but until now had no word that it happened.

"This is excellent news," he said. "We have a government backing us up. This is becoming an international thing."

So what's next?

"We wait and we pray," said Kucinich.

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Hungarian dancers in October 2006 at the Scout House owned by the now-closed St. Emeric church. The church was an important part of Hungarian culture in Cleveland, and Rep. Dennis Kucinich is trying to get the Hungarian government involved in challenging the decision to close it.