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CHURCH CLOSINGS REFLECT CHANGING TIMES; **Nationality parishes** fight for survival in Cleveland

BYLINE: Robert L. Smith, Plain Dealer Reporter

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The 10:30 a.m. Polish Mass at St. Casimir Church a week ago Sunday had the feel of something precious in peril.

The sun beamed through stained-glass windows to bathe a sanctuary as big and as beautiful as any church in Poznan, the Old-World city for which the neighborhood was once known.

Immigrant families joined first- and second-generation Polish-Americans in song and prayer in the mother tongue. But there were too few of them - no more than 50 in a church that could hold a thousand.

St. Casimir, one of the last vestiges of an old Polish neighborhood off East 79th Street in Cleveland, typifies many of the 51 **nationality parishes** of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese. It is old, beloved and no longer surrounded by the ethnic culture that built it.

The faithful fear the worst this weekend, when Bishop Richard Lennon is to decree which churches must close so others can thrive.

Greater Cleveland's **nationality parishes** - seen by many as part of a bygone era - loom especially vulnerable in the coming downsizing. As they pray for deliverance, members of historic parishes are trying to explain themselves to a region that has mostly moved on. They insist that their churches offer more than polka Masses and bilingual confessions - that they enrich a multicultural region and still bolster the neighborhoods they helped build.

Right now, their goal is to survive.

"I was baptized here, I was married here, and I want to be buried from here," Tina Girod of Painesville Township said from the altar of St. Casimir, looking out on a masterpiece packed with memories. She gulped and whispered, "We don't want the building destroyed."

It has come to that.

A diocese built for more than 1 million Catholics needs to shrink to address a new reality, church leaders say. The flock has dwindled to fewer than 800,000, and most have scattered to the suburbs. A shortage of priests and money exacerbates the demographic changes.

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The bishop says the diocese needs to close nearly 50 churches, mostly in the cities, to more equitably distribute resources across eight counties. His two-year decision-making process will climax this weekend.

Parish committees, most clustered geographically, have given their recommendations to the bishop, who intends to share his decisions with parish priests Saturday. The faithful will hear the verdict at weekend services.

A parish like St. Casimir, founded in 1892, could learn it will be closed in 16 months.

"It became a question of how we can best equitably serve all the people," diocese spokesman Robert Tayek said Thursday.

He acknowledged the contributions of **nationality parishes**, but he also spoke of a new era.

For much of the diocese's history, ethnic churches commanded respect. There was hardly any other kind of parish. From 1880 to 1930, immigrants founded nearly every new Catholic church in the region. They often built grand structures imbued with craftsmanship.

"They came from places where the church was always the grandest edifice in the village," explained Cleveland historian John Grabowski. "The church was the center of everything for them."

Even today, **nationality parishes** make up nearly one quarter of the diocese's 224 parishes, flags in a sacred United Nations.

The region's honorary Lithuanian consul general has her office at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the largest Lithuanian parish in Ohio. St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a national landmark on Buckeye Road, was the first Hungarian Catholic church in North America. SS. Cyril and Methodius Church of Lakewood, more than 100 years old, still offers a Mass in Slovak.

But many of the **nationality parishes** are shadows of their Bohemian or German or Italian roots. Neighborhoods changed. Enrollments dwindled. And diocese officials question whether a principal offering of the ethnic church - Mass in the mother tongue - is essential when most parishioners speak English.

"Is there still a need there?" Tayek asked. "We see it in these new and emerging immigrant communities. But for the older ethnic groups, is there the need there once was? How many people are limited to the Hungarian language?"

Such questions raise passions at churches like St. Emeric, a busy complex behind the West Side Market. On Friday nights, more than 200 boys and girls of the Hungarian Scouts crowd into the Scout House, where they speak only Hungarian, a language they are also expected to read and write.

Some belong to a Hungarian folk dance troupe, which rehearses on Tuesday nights. Monday nights are reserved for the Hungarian language school.

"There's a lot of activity going on all week, and we're not talking bingo," said Scout leader Mike Horvath, of North Royalton.

He and other members of St. Emeric describe their church as a cultural center, a beacon to a Hungarian-American community widely dispersed.

"When our kids learn their culture and their religion in our native language, we think they learn more," he said.

The diocese allowed its three Hungarian churches - St. Emeric, St. Elizabeth and St. Margaret of Hungary in Orange - to form their own nationality cluster, in contrast to the territorial clusters that defined others.

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Still, it expected the trio to submit a plan to merge into one, which committee members refused to do. Only the bishop knows what will happen Saturday.

"It makes my heart ache, the way we're waiting for the sword to fall," said Andrea Meszaros, president of the Cleveland Hungarian Heritage Society and a member of St. Elizabeth.

She argues all three Hungarian churches are paying their bills and providing a rich faith experience and should be left alone.

"It's not an office building or a Municipal Stadium that you just tear down," she said. "Let them die a natural death."

Some **nationality parishes** have sought to enhance their survival chances by hiring canon lawyers - experts in church law - proposing new programs and making appeals to the bishop.

When the cluster committee that includes St. Casimir recommended the landmark church go dark, St. Casimir members submitted a dissenting opinion. They proposed that their church become a multicultural parish, perhaps with services in several languages, or an ethnic church museum tied to nearby University Circle.

There is desperation in the hopes of parishioners like Girod, 53, for whom St. Casimir is all that's left of a special place.

Mom ran Karpinski's tavern. Grandma owned the neighborhood candy store. There was a butcher and a baker on streets still named Pulaski and Sowinski. There was sledding down the hills of Rockefeller Park after winter classes at St. Casimir School.

The cathedral of that lost world still stands, votive candles blazing.

"We certainly are still praying," Girod said. "And miracles do happen."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: rsmith@plaind.com, 216-999-4024

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