

## July 1, 2007 - Cardinal Egan Paints Himself an Unhappy Ending

By Grant Gallicho, The New York Observer

On the morning of Feb. 26, the Rev. Eugene Sawicki, parish priest of Our Lady of Vilnius on Broome Street, traveled uptown for a meeting he'd been summoned to by Cardinal Edward M. Egan. Father Sawicki had known for months that the archdiocese was planning to close his church—established in 1909 to serve the once-booming Lithuanian Catholic community—but he was never told when. Not long into the meeting, Cardinal Egan informed Father Sawicki that the parish was being padlocked as they spoke. Hours later, parishioners arriving at Vilnius for the noon Mass were turned away by security guards.

The quick strike seemed highly deliberate.

Never the most popular of New York archbishops, Cardinal Egan was in the midst of a difficult round of parish closings and he was still smarting from a nasty public row with his priests that left him looking more like a C.E.O. than a pastor to a flock of 2.5 million souls. Just two weeks earlier, parishioners of Our Lady Queen of Angels in Harlem staged a round-the-clock prayer vigil in the sanctuary to protest his decision to close the church. Six of them were arrested as local news cameras rolled.

His surprise closure of Vilnius was designed to save himself the headache of another public protest.

But the plan backfired, setting in motion a series of events that would eventually involve the New York Supreme Court, the U.S. government, the president of Lithuania and the Pope.

Now, as the archdiocese prepares for its bicentennial in 2008 and as Cardinal Egan enters the home stretch as archbishop, the controversy over Our Lady of Vilnius has become a symbol of the heavy-handed managerial style and poor public relations that have characterized Cardinal Egan's tenure, which now threatens to end amid court proceedings and desperate diplomatic maneuverings.

He arrived in New York in May 2000 as the city was still mourning the death of Cardinal John O'Connor, and he inherited a sprawling archdiocese that was undergoing huge changes. The immigrants who once populated—and often built—New York's Catholic churches were dispersing, leaving ever fewer warm bodies to keep up with the increasing costs of maintenance.

Yet some small congregations can keep afloat if parishioners are sufficiently generous and financially savvy. Our Lady of Vilnius didn't have any big-money benefactor or quiet endowments, but it was self-sustaining.

"We didn't owe the archdiocese one cent," said Gertrude McAleer, former lay trustee of the parish and church secretary. "They haven't given us anything for decades."

So why shutter the church? And why do so with no warning?

On Jan. 19, the archdiocese held a press conference to announce the parishes that would be closed or merged as part of its "realignment" plan, as the process is euphemistically called. It had been known for several years that the realignment was in the works. Cardinal Egan studied the problem for a few years, allowing parishes on the chopping block to make their case—and he earned high marks for the process.

When the archdiocese announced the affected parishes, Our Lady of Vilnius was not on the list. Instead, reporters received a separate news release explaining that, while the church was not part of the realignment, it would be closed because of low attendance and a lack of services in Lithuanian.

Because discussions about Vilnius predated the realignment, the parish was "not part of the realignment process," explained Joseph Zwilling, director of communications for the archdiocese. Yet the upshot of the sidebar announcement was that Vilnius was effectively ignored as reporters wrote about the much larger realignment story.

But the Lithuanian community took note, if few others did. A week after the press conference, Valdas Adamkus, the president of Lithuania, stepped in. He wrote to Cardinal Egan asking him to reconsider his decision. The cardinal's Feb. 15 reply repeated the argument that the Lithuanian community wouldn't be significantly affected, and added: "The Church of Our Lady of Vilnius was in serious disrepair long before I was appointed archbishop. It would cost more than five million dollars to restore it . . . I have been advised by experts that the structure is not sound and that it is not safe to permit people to continue to use the building."

(This account is disputed by parishioners. Gertrude McAleer, who has been involved in the parish for more than a decade, said that the parish hired its own engineers to inspect the roof and found that repairs would actually have cost \$100,000.)

Cardinal Egan deployed the same language regarding structural damage and the cost of repair—word for word—in a March 5 letter responding to Warren L. Miller, who heads the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. Mr. Miller wrote Cardinal Egan on Feb. 23, lobbying him to overturn the decision to close the church.

Lacking compelling legal authority, the commission can only persuade, and in this case it failed. In rejecting Mr. Miller's appeal, Cardinal Egan wrote: "While your letter mentions that the Parish Church is historic and beautiful, it is really not much more than a simple building with no especially attractive or historic elements."

In fact, Vilnius's stained-glass windows were crafted by the well-regarded Lithuanian artist V. K. Jonynas (1907-1997), and several of its works of art—especially the icon of the Virgin Mary and the apse fresco—were objects of devotion.

And that made Cardinal Egan's next step that much more painful for the parishioners. On April 30, several of them were able to get inside the parish only to discover that many of the art works Cardinal Egan dismissed had in fact been removed. Worse, besides carting off the altar, pews, statues and several paintings, the archdiocese had the apse fresco covered in blue paint.

Mr. Zwilling said that the sacred objects were taken away for safekeeping. And the decision to paint over the fresco was taken on the advice of an art-preservation firm, he explained, to protect it from deterioration and vandalism and "because it is impossible to remove a fresco from plaster."

(Frescoes are by definition applied to plaster, and Nathan Zakheim, of the Los Angeles-based art-restoration firm Nathan Zakheim Associates, has been removing them for 30 years. Painting over a fresco to "protect" it, Mr. Zakheim said, "is simply unethical from any standpoint.")

In a last-ditch effort, the lay trustees of the parish—Ms. McAleer and Joseph Pantuliano—took the archdiocese to court, and won a temporary restraining order halting the removal or alteration of anything inside the church. But the archdiocese responded, producing church documents showing that the plaintiffs' terms as trustees expired on March 31 and that Cardinal Egan had replaced them; therefore they had no legal standing. Finally, the archdiocese successfully argued that the state could not intervene in matters internal to church governance. A New York Supreme Court judge vacated the restraining order.

"At this point, I think it's finished," Ms. McAleer said, adding, "I handed the parish to the archdiocese on a silver platter the moment I called about the roof."

While Mr. Zwilling has repeatedly denied that the archdiocese is planning to sell the parish, Ms. McAleer isn't convinced. In the summer of 2004, after the scaffolding had been installed in the church, Cardinal Egan and a few other archdiocesan officials dropped by Vilnius unannounced. Ms. McAleer and Mr. Pantuliano gave them a tour of the facilities—the church interior, the basement and finally the backyard. According to Ms. McAleer, when the group reached the garden, Cardinal Egan turned to Mr. Pantuliano and asked, "Where is the property line?"

The cardinal never explained the purpose of the visit.

Ramutė Žukas, the president of Lithuanian American Community Inc., New York, remains hopeful of finding a way to stop the process: “We’re exploring our options. We’re not giving up.” Apart from civil proceedings, Ms. Žukas noted that the parish is still awaiting a ruling on its appeal to the Vatican under canon law.

Indeed, the president of Lithuania announced that at a recent meeting with Pope Benedict XVI the two discussed Our Lady of Vilnius. According to President Adamkus, the pontiff agreed to raise the issue with the U.S. bishops.

To date, the archdiocese of New York has not heard from the pope or the U.S. bishops’ conference.

In the meantime, Cardinal Egan faces rising discontent from disgruntled clergy and lay Catholics during what may well be his final year as archbishop. As mandated by church law, a bishop must submit his letter of resignation when he turns 75, as Cardinal Egan did in April. How long he stays is up to the Pope, but it’s expected that he’ll be here through the archdiocese’s bicentennial celebrations, which conclude next April.

If Gertrude McAleer had her druthers, he’d be gone well before then. “There are so many people not going to church because of him,” she said. “To me, that’s a scandal.”

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