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Archbishop
Raymond Burke

Parishioners defy archbishop

Parish may face denial of sacraments

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Parishioners of St. Stanislaus Kostka voted not to transfer money and property controlled by a lay board of directors to the St. Louis archdiocese, in defiance of St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke.

The decision came after Burke advised the parish's lay board of directors Jan. 3 that if they didn't comply with his demands, they faced interdiction, a punishment just short of ex-communication, which would deny them the sacraments.

Despite the threat, the parish voted 299 to five against the transfer Jan. 9. When the result was announced, a crowd that included young children and elderly parishioners, rose to its feet and sang in Polish, "May we live 100 years."

At the heart of the vote is the issue of control (*NCR*, Oct. 1). In 1891, St. Louis Archbishop Peter Kenrick signed a deed transferring St. Stanislaus' property to a parish-run corporation with a lay board of directors. Today its assets are worth over \$9 million. The parishioners want to continue operating as they have for 124 years.

In July 2003, then-Archbishop Justin Rigali called for the parish to transfer money and property into an archdiocesan trust. As a result, the lay board would cease to exist. Rigali's successor, Burke, continued pressing the matter, stating that the current structure does not comply with canon law. He has said he wants the board to amend the parish's corporate documents, which would take control out of the hands of the lay board and put it under archdiocesan control.

After Burke requested that the lay board of directors be dissolved, the board appealed to the Vatican. The Congregation for the Clergy denied the appeal Nov. 11, ruling that amendments to the original 1891 incorporation documents meant that they no longer complied with church law.

Both sides retained attorneys. Last month it appeared a compromise was near after both sides agreed to set up an irrevocable trust. But talks broke down. The board claimed that the archdiocesan proposal would be governed by canon law not civil law. After losing one battle over canon law, the

directors insisted that civil law have control. Burke, however, claimed the irrevocable trust would be enforceable by the Missouri attorney general.

There's been a pitched public relations battle. Recently, the archdiocese hired local television investigative reporter Jamie Allman as their chief spokesperson. Allman told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that the St. Stanislaus "board of directors hijack[ed] a Catholic church."

The day of the vote, the board received a petition signed by approximately 140 parishioners asking them to adopt Burke's plan. The signatures were gathered at St. John the Apostle and Evangelist Church, which is where Polish Masses have been held since the archbishop removed St. Stanislaus' priest in August.

However, board chair William Bialczak said these could probably not be counted as votes because he believes bylaws require votes to be cast in person.

Even the wording used on the ballot was a sore point. Burke said in his Jan. 3 letter that the ballot question didn't "address properly" his request.

The question put to the vote read: "Should we turn over all property, funds and parish control to the archdiocese of St. Louis?" Burke favored a question that asked for approval of amendments to the corporate documents to comply with church law.

Afterwards, Allman said in a news conference that based on how the ballot was worded, "The archbishop would have voted no." Burke was on a retreat during the voting, but his Jan. 3 letter said that the vote would have "no bearing on the future of the parish."

The parishioners' response to the public relations spin and lawyer-like debate over wording was very clear: They will not relinquish control of the property.

The board is undecided about its next step. However, Bialczak anticipates the board will be sued in civil court. Allman conceded the possibility.

The board will wait to see if Burke makes good on his threat of interdiction. In his Jan. 3 letter, Burke warned that if the board of directors remains defiant, "I will have no choice but to declare that St. Stanislaus Kostka is not a Roman Catholic parish."

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