

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUS CHAN | THE PLAIN DEALER

Joseph Wienczek, 15, holds the cross before the start of the procession at St. Peter Catholic Church last Sunday.

Churches: Pastors see a renewed fervor in flocks

FROM A1

But in early March 2012, Lennon received decrees from a Vatican tribunal saying that he failed to properly follow church law and procedures when he closed the 11 churches.

Lennon had 60 days to appeal the Vatican rulings, but about 40 days later, he announced he was reopening the 11 churches, and he went to work shuffling priests to fill the pulpits and meeting with parishioners. Three priests have each been assigned to pastor two parishes.

The first to reopen — on July 15 — were St. Casimir in Cleveland and St. John the Baptist in Akron. The last to reopen was St. Emeric in Cleveland on Nov. 4.

"So far, so good," said the Rev. Eric Orzech, who doubles as pastor of St. Casimir and St. Stanislaus in Cleveland's Slavic Village. "They gave me two parishes to juggle, and I haven't dropped one yet."

St. Casimir, which sits in a distressed neighborhood on Cleveland's East Side, has only one Sunday Mass, which 100 to 300 people attend, said Orzech. The numbers are low, he acknowledged, but higher than what they were before the church closed.

And there's much more enthusiasm, he said. "You ask for a volunteer, you get 20 people," said Orzech, noting that parishioners have already thrown three fundraising dances since the reopening.

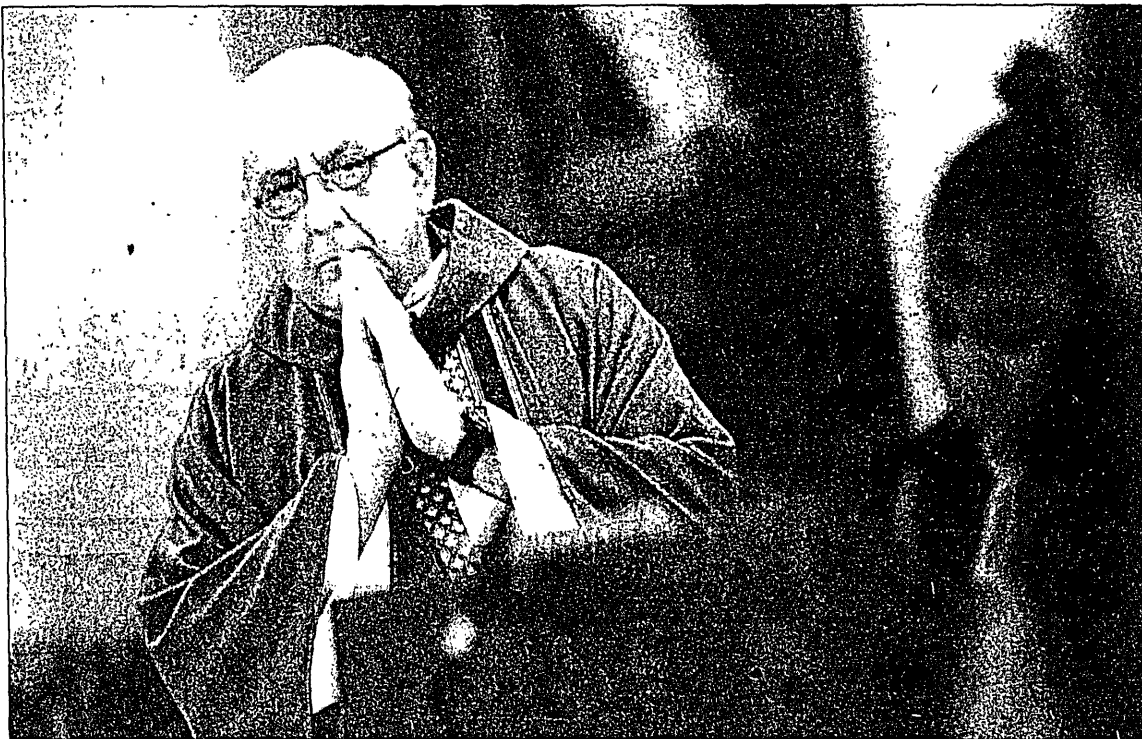
Orzech speculated that the church closings were actually wakeup calls for some Catholics who might have taken their parishes for granted.

"It snapped complacency," he said. "Across the board, you're seeing a renewed fervor."

Two other priests who are each serving as pastors of two churches — the Rev. Joseph Workman and the Rev. Gary Chmura — said reopening a closed church is starting from scratch.

"It's not rebuilding, it's restarting," said Workman, who is pastor at St. James and St. Clement, both in Lakewood. "It's a slow process."

Chmura, who is pastor at St. Adalbert and Our Lady of Peace,



The Rev. Gary Chmura listens during a reading at an Ash Wednesday service at St. Adalbert Catholic Church in Cleveland. The church on East 83rd Street reopened last summer after a Vatican council overturned Bishop Richard Lennon's order to have it closed.

both in Cleveland, said, "It's like founding a new parish, except the buildings are already up. Usually, a parish is founded first, and the buildings are put up later."

'We need to do more'

St. Adalbert, which reopened in August, is the first and only black Catholic church in the diocese. "We're moderately successful," said Chmura. "But right now, it's just a place to have Mass and doughnuts afterwards. We'd like to do more, and we need to do more."

He said his small congregation is planning to put together a monthly meal program for the neighborhood's poor. And Chmura has been in talks with officials at the nearby Juvenile Justice Center about creating programs for at-risk youths.

"The justice center is in our neighborhood, and the souls of those kids are in our hands," he said. "Once we get these programs going, I can say, 'Now we're a parish rather than a Mass

station.' We don't want to be a Mass station. You can go to Mass anywhere."

A number of priests interviewed said one of the biggest challenges is trying to locate former parishioners. After their churches closed, some joined other parishes. Some walked away from the church entirely. Attendance records were sketchy, missing or destroyed.

"I had to start a mailing list, piecing together old records from God knows when," said Chmura. "Are you still alive? If so, are you still a member?"

Chmura said the process is slow, and there are only about 100 people at Sunday Mass at St. Adalbert. "But it's going OK," he said. "It's a tiny group of people, but they are enormously dedicated."

Workman sees the same dedication at St. James, which reopened in July.

"A lot of people have really worked hard to clean the place up," he said. "They got down on their hands and knees. They got

into the corners and really cleaned. They did an awesome job."

St. Barbara on Denison Avenue in Cleveland, which reopened in July, has two Sunday Masses, one in English and one in Polish, a Saturday evening Mass and Monday-through-Friday morning Masses.

Its pastor, the Rev. Joseph Hillinski, said collections are between \$4,000 and \$5,000 a month, which he said is "reasonable."

And parishioners, he said, have been making and distributing sandwiches to the hunger center at St. Malachi Catholic Church near downtown and raising money for the Fatima Family Center, a social-service agency on Cleveland's East Side.

"We're lucky," he said. "We've got a lot of good people who are very supportive. They want to help."

Slow going at first

The Rev. Robert Kropac has been assigned to two reopened

churches, St. Peter in downtown Cleveland and St. Wendelin on the city's near West Side.

On Sundays, he celebrates 10 a.m. Mass at St. Wendelin, then heads over to St. Peter for 11:30 a.m. Mass. "I'm my assistant," he said.

St. Wendelin, which reopened in July, has about 400 parishioners on its books. St. Peter, which reopened in September, has only about 75.

"In both parishes, it's slow," said Kropac. "We've got a lot of work to do. It just takes time. And I'm still getting my feet wet."

When Kropac reopened St. Wendelin, he discovered a major leak in the rectory roof, resulting in \$30,000 in damage. "We're just cleaning up from that now," he said.

He also discovered that a statue of St. Wendelin was returned missing its metal shepherd's crook, replaced with a wooden walking stick. Also, a sculpted relief of the Last Supper was missing a hand of Jesus.

ONLINE: See a Gus Chan photo gallery of the reopened churches. cleveland.com/metro

The hand has been fixed, but the parish wants the shepherd's crook back.

Meanwhile, the parish has a new office manager, computer, website, Twitter account (eight followers as of last week), and a baby grand piano to accompany the re-formed adult and children choirs.

"We all have to pitch in and do what it takes to put it all back together," said Susan Kidd-Dailey, who became St. Wendelin's office manager a little over a month ago. "We're noticing every Sunday more and more people are coming back. Lots of kids and crying babies."

St. Peter's isn't seeing quite the same activity. When Lennon closed it in 2010, its pastor, the Rev. Robert Marrone, along with the bulk of his congregation of about 300, broke away from the diocese and set up a worship space in a rented commercial building.

Despite threats and pleas from the bishop, Marrone and his followers refused to come back to the diocese. Lennon issued a decree last week excommunicating Marrone.

Kropac said he is hopeful he can build on the 75 people, including former St. Peter parishioners who returned when the church reopened. "These are 75 people who are committed," he said. "I'm optimistic. I think we've got a chance."

Besides the missing crook, St. Wendelin's is also missing a metal book stand. St. James is missing sets of candlesticks, and St. Patrick in West Park had four green candle stands that were returned painted white.

At St. Casimir, a St. Anthony statue was returned but is not the same St. Anthony statue that was there before the church closed.

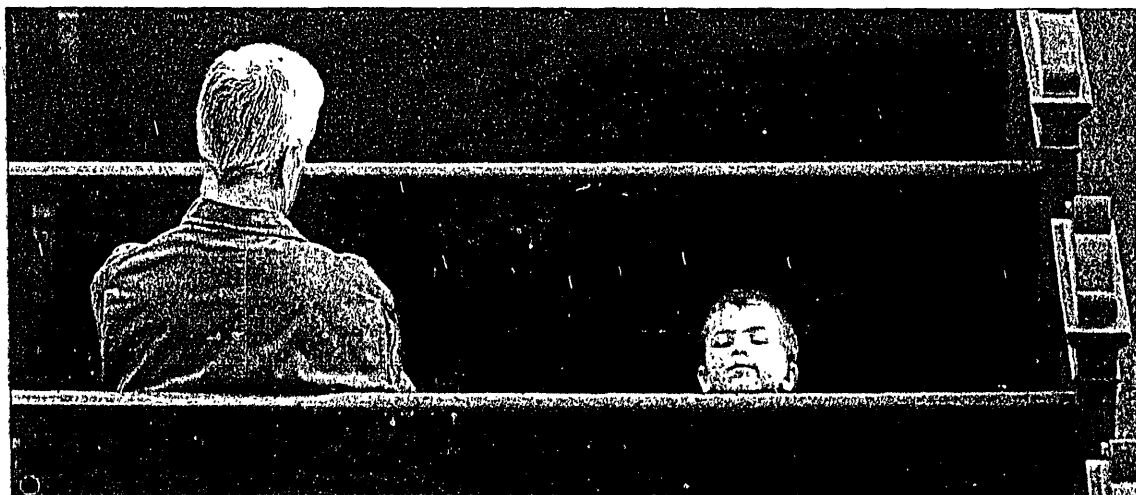
"We have stuff missing and some stuff back," said St. Casimir's Orzech. "We're waiting for more stuff to return."

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The closed, then reopened, churches

These are the 11 closed churches that reopened after winning their Vatican appeals.

Closed		Reopened
6-6-10	St. Adalbert, Cleveland	8-12-12
5-9-10	St. Barbara, Cleveland	7-22-12
11-8-09	St. Casimir, Cleveland	7-15-12
6-30-10	St. Emeric, Cleveland	11-4-12
5-30-10	St. Patrick (West Park)	7-22-12
4-11-10	St. Peter, Cleveland	9-9-12
5-23-10	St. Wendelin, Cleveland	7-29-12
6-26-10	St. James, Lakewood	7-25-12
11-15-09	St. Mary, Bedford	7-22-12
10-31-09	St. John the Baptist, Akron	7-15-12
6-27-10	St. Mary, Akron	8-15-12



Lucas Geffert, 3, of Cleveland, gets fidgety while attending Mass at St. Wendelin Catholic Church in Cleveland last Sunday with his father, Paul.