

Lithuanian bishops try to keep open American parishes

VILNIUS, Lithuania – Lithuania's Catholic bishops said they would try to do everything within their authority to help keep open Lithuanian-American churches in the United States.

"Lithuanian bishops cannot directly deal with the issues of the parishes that are in the territory of another bishops' conference, but will seek in their own turn that those parishes are not closed," said the statement, released after the bishops' meeting in mid-January.

"Those parishes are significant as Lithuanian Catholic centers, as religious and cultural heritage, and they also provide a possibility to evangelize the new immigrants," the bishops said, stressing that the best way to retain such parishes is to keep Lithuanian-American parishioners active.

Lithuanian officials and the Lithuanian American Community Inc. had asked the Lithuanian bishops to approach the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference "and mediate in appropriate Vatican institutions in order to protect the traditional Lithuanian parishes and objects of cultural heritage." They expressed concern over the future of Our Lady of Vilnius Church in New York City and other Lithuanian-American churches in the Archdiocese of Boston.

Joseph Zwilling, director of communications for the Archdiocese of New York, told Catholic News Service Jan. 30 that Our Lady of Vilnius Church in New York City was closing because of "the physical condition of the church," decrease in attendance and decrease in the church's services.

However, Father Eugene Sawicki, pastor of the church, said the parish is active and has minimal structural damage, but that the archdiocese wants to sell the property for money.

Officials of the Archdiocese of Boston did not return CNS' calls.

Monsignor Gintaras Grusas, secretary-general of the Lithuanian bishops' conference, said the Lithuanian bishops were acting informally "and off the record," which he said is the most effective means to try to keep the parishes alive.

He added that the parish closures reflect the U.S. bishops' attempt to adapt to the changing situation.

"Fifty years ago Lithuanians and immigrants of other nations clustered in large cities where there was labor available, and that is how the Lithuanian parishes and cultural centers arose," he said, but the families of the immigrants have grown up and moved away from the city centers.

"American bishops are trying to guarantee pastoral care for all ethnic groups and to realign parishes in the most rational way," he said.

Contributing to this story was Regina Linskey in Washington.