Stepsisters

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Stepsisters
By Patrick Donachie
With Reporting by Jessica Bal

Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014

At approximately noon, Virginia Gonzalez’ phone began to ring incessantly. Calls, voicemails and texts flooded in. The names flashing on her screen were all parishioners at St. Roch, the South Bronx church Virginia attended for decades.

“I started getting a million calls,” Virginia said, “saying, ‘do you know? Do you know?’”

From what she could ascertain, the pastor at St. Roch Catholic Church read a letter at the end of mass from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the head of the New York City Catholic Archdiocese. The letter stated that St. Roch would close by Aug. 1, 2015, and its congregation would merge with a local parish. The congregation erupted in anger and disbelief.

“I think everybody was in shock,” she said. “People were crying, people were sitting numb.”

Amidst the tears, parishioners approached the pastor after he read the letter, questioning what could be done to stop the closure. The pastor told them that the Cardinal had made his decision.

Virginia recalled rumors from earlier in the year about a program called Making All Things New. Friends from other churches worried that it was a strategy to shut down parishes, but others believed it was merely a process to help New York parishes better coordinate their resources.

Each parish was supposed to have representatives attend Making All Things New meetings, but Virginia had discovered that St. Roch’s representatives did not; the church’s congregation is primarily Hispanic, the representatives spoke only Spanish, and the meetings had been conducted in English. Virginia had asked St. Roch’s pastor about the process, seeking assurance that the parish wouldn’t be closed. She was told not to worry.

Like her fellow parishioners, Virginia was stunned. The parish’s role in her life was a family affair; her four children all received the sacraments there, and she recalled Saturday trips she organized for the congregations’ youth. Virginia stayed home for the rest of the day, too saddened to visit the church.

That evening, Virginia watched a piece on the news about the church closures that were announced throughout the city. An array of weeping parishioners and chapel facades flashed across the screen, and the reporter mentioned that each church had 10 days to appeal to the Archdiocese to try and reverse the decision.
Virginia had no idea what that meant.

“I sat down and started Googling church closures,” Virginia said. “And I found something that said ‘Appeals for Dummies.’ And I thought, ‘I’m not a dummy. I can do this. This is my calling.’” She stayed up until three in the morning, and went to bed hoping that the Cardinal’s decision could be reversed.

She also learned about Sister Kate Kuenstler, a lawyer who had represented parishes that faced closure throughout the country. Virginia sent Kuenstler an email, and she replied almost immediately. The first step, she wrote, was to send a letter to the Archdiocese asking that they reconsider the closure decision. This would almost certainly be denied, but it would give Virginia the grounds to appeal directly to the Vatican.

Next Sunday at St. Roch, Virginia approached the priest and asked to address the parishioners at the conclusion of mass. She wanted to tell the congregation that she wanted to fight the closure.

“I told them I can’t promise anything, I can’t do miracles, I’m learning as I go,” she said. “But I’ll do what I can.”

That day, the Archdiocese announced that 30 other churches would be closed along with St. Roch by Aug. 1, 2015. It was the largest closure in the history of the diocese, slashing the number of parishes by 20 percent. The Archdiocese, which includes churches in Manhattan, Staten Island, the Bronx and some upstate, cited numerous factors, including dwindling attendance at Sunday masses and debt incurred by insolvent parishes that was being subsidized by the Archdiocese.

The Catholic population of New York (and the country) is undeniably in flux. According to the Pew Research Center, 20.8 percent of Americans identified as Catholic in 2014, a 3.1 percent drop since 2007. 35 percent of New York Catholics are Hispanic, on par with the nationwide average of 34 percent (whites are at 57 percent in New York City and 59 percent in the country).

The Archdiocese established Making All Things New in 2009 to examine the attendance and finances of its parishes. The parishes were split into groups of five, called ‘cluster groups,’ and each parish was to send representatives for group meetings. These groups would study the churches in their clusters to make a recommendation on whether they should be ‘merged’ (when two congregations join in one church building) or remain open while pooling resources to cut costs. The Archdiocese contends that Cardinal Dolan took these recommendations under advisement before making his final decisions.

The Archdiocese said it also took surveys at each parish in order to gauge parishioners’ opinions on how Making All Things New should proceed. Virginia and other
parishioners at St. Roch claim that they never took those surveys, nor were any ever offered at their church. The Archdiocese put all the survey results on its official website, though there is nothing listed under the number of responses for St. Roch.

To facilitate the cluster process, the Archdiocese hired the Reid Group, a Seattle-based firm that specializes in consulting dioceses throughout the country when they close churches. Sister Kate Kuenstler worked to reverse closure decisions in 30 dioceses around the country, and she says that the Reid Group was involved in the pre-closure process for nearly all of them.

Kuenstler (or “Sister Kate” as she’s known to most) has been a sister in vows for 45 years, and earned a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical University at St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome. She’s worked as an independent canon lawyer since 1996, and in the past decade she’s primarily focused on appealing church mergers. She operates out of her home in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, though her work takes her throughout the country.

“I live in this house,” she said. “And my car lives in the airport parking lot.”

Kuenstler is a renowned canon law expert. Canon law, one of the oldest forms of currently practiced law in the world, is the collection of laws governing a Christian institution like the Catholic Church. These laws gradually change with new decisions and precedence, and though canon law holds no sway in civil court, its procedure are similar, including the use of attorneys and the means to appeal rulings to higher courts.

According to canon law, when a Cardinal decides a parish should be closed, the Archdiocese must supply the affected parishes with physical copies of the decree, the official church document that announces the decision. The Vatican requires parishioners to include a paper copy of the decree if they appeal the closure decision to the Vatican. The Archdiocese must receive the response from parishes within 10 working days of the merger’s announcement, and parishes only have 15 days from the Archdiocese’s response to file recourse with the Vatican.

Kuenstler asserts that Cardinal Dolan violated canon law when the Archdiocese did not send the parishes physical copies of the decree, which made it more difficult for parishioners to appeal the closure decisions. To see the decrees, parishioners had to make an appointment with the Archdiocese in Manhattan, where they could rarely take pictures and never make copies. The decrees were not publically available until February 2015, when they were put on the Archdiocese’s website.

The decrees for church mergers must also spell out the individual reasons for that closure, according to Kuenstler. The 67 decrees the Archdiocese released in February are almost identical, and she believes that Cardinal Dolan did not take the Reid Group cluster recommendations into account.
“To issue a decree that does not fit the parish that is being closed is reprehensible,” she said. “If you had done real due diligence, if you had used the documentation from the two year study by the Reid Group, I would not have had clients.”

Sunday, July 31, 2015

On the balcony of Our Lady of Peace, a small parish on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, the Patriot Brass Ensemble eased into the opening strains of “How Close Thou Art.” The hymn was a favorite of parishioner Jessica Bede, who stood in a pew on the ground floor. She reached for the hand of Melissande Valdes, a friend and a longtime parishioner of the church. The noon mass was the fifth one held at Our Lady of Peace in 24 hours, and it was the last mass before the parish would be closed.

“I was wearing beige,” Jessica said. “I didn’t want to wear black.”

Bede is a third-generation member of the parish’s flock. She’d been baptized and married at its altar, and the funeral processions for her parents and her sister departed from its steps. She’d spent time away from New York for college and lived in Westchester for several years, but she always called the church home. When the Archdiocese announced that Our Lady of Peace would be closed, she was devastated.

“It’s like someone took my memory books and took all of the pictures you had and the photographs you had for your lifetime and was just throwing them in a fire somewhere,” she said. “Because that’s where all of those happy memories as well as the tragic ones were focused.”

Jessica and Melissande attended all five masses, including one at midnight conducted in Latin. More than a dozen press trucks were stationed outside, and parishioners fielded questions from networks including Telemundo, NBC and CBS. Melissande and Jessica stood before cameras to speak about the loss of their church as reporters scribbled quotes into notebooks.

At the end of the mass, Father Bartholomew Daly, the church’s beloved pastor, bowed before the altar and turned towards the exit. The crowd erupted in applause, and some wept openly. Jessica’s own eyes swelled with tears that she hid behind dark sunglasses. She turned to Melissande and her nephew, and said she needed to leave.

“I can’t do this,” she said. “I know my limits.”

Father Daly stood at the door, thanking parishioners as they exited the church. Jessica kept her sunglasses on as she approached, not wanting to upset Daly with her tears. She walked up to him, shook his hand and smiled.

“You’re having more final performances than Frank Sinatra,” she said.
Father Daly laughed and said goodbye, and her eyes welled anew the moment she turned away. Jessica made her way through the crowd of parishioners and press, away from Our Lady of Peace. As the last mass concluded, locksmiths arrived to change the locks to the parish doors.

The next day, the toll of the all-nighter caught up with everyone.

“It looked like a college bender,” Jessica said. “Nobody did well with it.”

Late that afternoon, Melissande returned to Our Lady of Peace, and the lack of sleep and loss of her parish made her delirious. When she arrived, she was shocked to find approximately 30 people milling around the church house steps. Jessica was there, along with parishioner Janice Lynch. There were faces unfamiliar to Jessica and Melissande, but they struck up conversations with strangers by asking what services they attended.

“We looked at each other and said ‘you’re an 8:30, so you were in the services that I was the Eucharistic minister for,’” Jessica said. “‘You were a 10:30, or you went to coffee hour.’”

After a few minutes, Lynch stepped to the parish entrance. Standing before newly lit candles that dripped wax down the stairs, she looked at her iPhone and began to tentatively recite the Rosary Novena to Our Lady, a paean to the church’s namesake. She raised her hand and encouraged others to join in. Jessica sat to her right. Melissande stood in the crowd, murmuring along silently.

They began saying the rosary on the steps of the church, which they’ve continued to do nearly every day since the closure.

Janice Lynch’s history with Our Lady of Peace spans multiple generations. Her grandmother emigrated from Italy in 1921, and she married Lynch’s grandfather at the church one year later. Lynch and her husband were married there thirty years ago, and her grandmother, grandfather and father were all buried from the church.

“I remember going to mass there every Sunday,” she said. “I’d go to mass and then go to my grandparents for a big Italian meal.”

Italians like Lynch’s grandmother were rapidly moving into the neighborhood in the early part of the century, and many wanted to find a church where they could worship as Catholics. According to Lynch, there was a church in the neighborhood with an upper and lower room for services, but the Italian immigrants were told that they could not worship in the upper room.
“That didn’t sit too well with the Italians,” she said. Immigrant families pooled money to buy a Protestant church building on East 62nd St. The building was christened Our Lady of Peace and opened in 1919.

Our Lady of Peace was a ‘personal’ parish, which meant it catered to a specific demographic community. Personal parishes offer a spiritual site for parishioners to maintain the traditions of their shared homeland, and often have masses in languages besides English. Sometimes, the demographics change; many Italian families moved away from Our Lady of Peace in recent decades, but new families began filling the pews in their stead. St. Roch was also originally an Italian personal parish, but now focuses on its majority Hispanic population.

Unlike personal parishes, territorial parishes determine their church membership based on geographical location. Territorial parishes serve the needs of Catholics in a specific area, whereas personal parishes fill a hole for a parish community connected by background or language. Virginia said that St. Roch performed the latter role.

“You have to understand, a lot of these people come from very oppressed socio-economic backgrounds,” she said. “They're separated from their families, so the only families they have are the people they establish a relationship with and they find that the church is the best way for them to create this family extension.”

Tricia Bruce, an associate professor of sociology at Marymount College who studies personal parishes, said that a change in canon law in the 1980s widened the definition of what a personal parish could be. Churches that offer masses in Latin (like Holy Innocents on West 37th Street) or have masses for the deaf (like St. Elizabeth of Hungary on East 83rd Street) could be considered personal. Both of those parishes closed as a result of Making All Things New.

“I’ve heard so many people say that being in a personal parish is such a point of pride, of ownership,” Bruce said. “It means so much to them.”

Kuenstler and others assert that the Archdiocese overwhelmingly targeted personal parishes in the mergers. Charlie Shaw is a parishioner at St. Joseph’s in Poughkeepsie, another closed parish, and he said that churchgoers from personal parishes might not feel comfortable in territorial ones.

“St. Joseph’s has a Polish mass, probably the only Polish mass in the mid-Hudson region,” he said. “Those parishioners are more likely to not join the new parish, the merged parish, because they don’t offer the services.”

The Archdiocese would not say which closed parishes were personal, but twelve of the 31 churches that closed are identified as personal parishes on their decrees (including St. Roch, Our Lady of Peace and St. Joseph’s). Parishioners from three other closed churches maintain that their parishes are also personal, even though they are not designated as such on their decrees.
Parishioners from Our Lady of Peace, St. Roch and other parishes also claim that their churches were solvent and not in debt to the Archdiocese. Virginia and other St. Roch churchgoers said that St. Anselm, the church St. Roch is being merged with, is heavily in debt to the Archdiocese. According to Kuenstler, this scenario matches most of the other New York closures. She believes that Cardinal Dolan closed solvent churches so that the open parish would sell the closed church in order to pay down the debt they owe to the Archdiocese.

“The only way he could get the money is to keep the indebted parish open,” she said. “The only way the Cardinal could get that debt paid was to merge a parish that had money.”

Joseph Zwilling, the Archdiocese’s director of communications, believes that this misses the point of the mergers.

“Had the matter just been about which parishes were financially solvent, and which were not, we could have completed the process in about 20 minutes with an Excel spreadsheet,” he wrote in an email. “Parishes that were financially solvent were never meant to be excluded from our pastoral planning process. In fact, the suggestion that only poor parishes should have been involved in parish planning, is, in my opinion, offensive.”

Parishioners also worry that the shuttered buildings will be sold for the real estate value. Estimates for Our Lady of Peace’s worth are in the millions; one parishioner estimated the rectory alone could be worth $4 million. The Archdiocese must deconsecrate the buildings before they could be sold, but with the increased scarcity of vacant land in New York City, parishioners fear the temptation to sell quickly will only grow higher.

Kuenstler says that selling the property may be the Archdiocese’s plan to manage the debt it’s incurred.

“Canon law says that the Cardinal can do whatever he wants as long as the salvation of souls is not affected,” Kuenstler said. “But it’s not about that; it’s cold, hard cash.”

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Saturday, Sept. 26, 2015

62nd Street was dark save for the dull yellow glow of the streetlamps and the dimmed light of a dozen iPhones. The time read 4:30. The cadre of Our Lady of Peace parishioners huddled in the brisk morning, wondering when Pope Francis would leave his residence in Manhattan on his way to the airport and his final U.S. stop in Philadelphia.

“It’s a 9 a.m. flight,” one of the women said. “It’ll be 7 at the latest.”
Jessica, a blue Our Lady of Peace sash draped across her shoulder like a quiver for arrows, chuckled with Melissande about Pope Francis’ mass in Madison Square Garden. Jessica attended the service and said that the Pope had circled the arena floor to greet everyone and retired backstage to prepare.

“In that fifteen minutes after he leaves the floor to dress for the mass, they said to prepare for the service as you would in your own church, to which I looked at the person next to me, and I said ‘we have steps. We don’t have a church.’ And the two of us started crying,” she said. “People around us thought we were nuts.”

The group knew Pope Francis would drive down 66th Street on his way to LaGuardia Airport. Tami McLaughlin, the self-styled event planner of the group, grabbed a life-size cardboard cutout of Pope Francis (affectionately named the Pop-up Pope), and they started to walk four blocks north.

“Watch his head!” Jessica yelled, as the top of the fake Francis’ temple nearly collided with a storefront awning.

In addition to the paper pontiff, the women carried signs and three banners in English, Spanish and Italian that prayed for the pope to save Our Lady of Peace. After reaching 66th Street, the women unfurled the banners against the metal barricades set up by police that ran the length of the block.

Tami considered several locations for the Pop-up Pope, eventually deciding to prop him atop an elevated tree bed. She called her mother who was watching CNN for updates on when the pope was leaving. A nearby coffee store advertised “Pope-a-chinos” on its chalkboard outside, promising ‘salvation in a cup.’

A parishioner leaned out into the street, hoping to curve her banner so it could be seen from the Pope’s passing car.

“I hope I don’t go over,” she said.

“Take one for the team!” Jessica suggested, earning laughter from the group.

Soon after, Tami’s phone buzzed.

“My mother just texted. He just left!” she said. “Incoming, incoming.”

“He got in the car?” someone asked.

“All she said is now,” Tami replied. “So…now.”

Melissande held on tightly to the edge of one of the banners and pointed her iPhone towards the street when she spotted the motorcade. First came a cavalcade of police on motorcycles, followed by an array of ink-black sedans.
“It’s the car after the one with all the Vatican flags!” Tami yelled. “They try to throw us off!”

A car adorned with Vatican regalia sped by, followed by a tiny black Fiat. Pope Francis waved out the car’s back window in the direction of the parishioners, and the crowd caught a glimpse of a winsome smile from the Fiat’s interior.

The crowd applauded as Francis passed, and yells of “Papa” and “save our church” broke above the din. Afterwards, the women hugged and high-fived, trading pictures and jokes. Everyone asked the other women if they’d seen the pope and if the pope had seen them.

“I saw him, I saw him!” Jessica said. “He was looking at the sign and moving his lips.”

As Pope Francis’ Fiat raced towards LaGuardia, the women decided to head to the Silver Side Diner for breakfast and an emergency order of coffee. Jessica carried the pop-up Pope towards the diner, beaming.

“It looked…” she said, “…it looked like he was concentrating.”

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Melissande’s home phone rings four times before a frail voice at the other end of the line asks you to leave a message. The voice belongs to Alicia, Melissande’s aunt, who passed away after a four-year bout with leukemia on April 30, 2015. Alicia was the first member of Melissande’s family to attend Our Lady of Peace, and she brought Melissande to the parish when she was only four years old.

“Particularly to her and my grandmother who are immigrants from South America, things revolve around the church,” Melissande said. “So when you move to a neighborhood or anything, the first thing you look for is the supermarket and the church.”

Melissande’s birth mother passed away early in her life, and she moved back and forth between staying with her father and her grandmother and aunt, who lived together in an apartment one block from Our Lady of Peace. Melissande usually preferred to sit in the back of the chapel, leaving quickly and quietly at the close of each mass. As her aunt’s illness worsened, the church became even more essential. Melissande cared for her aunt at the home they shared, and would retreat to the pews of Our Lady of Peace because she didn’t want to weep in front of her.

“Everything revolves around this person, and you're always worried. You'd hear a siren, and run home as if something happened,” Melissande said. “The church, in these last years, was a way to both let your hair down, cry and let it out and be strengthened.”
Because of her aunt’s illness, Melissande heard little about the rumors that the church might close. It was only when Father Daly read the Cardinal’s letter in November that she realized the gravity of the loss. Her aunt had passed, followed quickly by her parish.

However, Melissande found strength in the fight to save the parish. She became close friends with Jessica during the frenzied last week before the church’s closure, and she also began to speak out about the pain her aunt’s passing caused her.

“It's a way to get over your fears. If someone needs you, you just try to help, even the quietest ones, the scared or meek, the ones who don’t put themselves out there or hide,” she said. “I hid. I hide.”

She also started to lead Our Lady’s parishioners in saying the rosary every day at the church steps. Though Melissande prayed the rosary with her grandmother as a child, she never led a group in prayer. Her natural inclination had been to not lead, to not speak about her troubles and to remain out of sight, sitting in the back row of the church. But the women in the prayer group asked for her help, and she now rotates with several other parishioners in leading the vigils.

“When I can help someone else, even though I'm down on the ground, I'm okay. I'm not garbage and I'm not totally disempowered because I just made a positive impact on this person,” she said. “I have to have some sort of substance in me to help this person. That's moving in the right direction. And you get enough of those people together, that's empowering.”

Sister Kuenstler also swears by the strength of the parishioners she’s met. She grew up in Belleville, IL, where she attended mass for decades. At the time, Catholic priests were already in sparing supply. The priest that oversaw Kuenstler’s parish also said mass at another church, despite the fact that he’d been dually stricken with chronic cancer and Parkinson’s disease.

Kuenstler remembered that the laypeople, or “laity” (defined as members of a parish who are not clergy) assisted him in fulfilling his duties, even driving him back and forth between the two parishes so he could say two masses on Sundays.

“The laity took care of him, and he functioned for 15 years beyond anyone’s expectations,” she said. “All of these priests are going to get older, and they’re going to need the laity. Cardinals like Dolan or anyone else, no one promotes the laity. They’re punishing the laity.”

Through her work with 30 dioceses throughout the country over the past decade, Kuenstler noticed repeating patterns, from the constant presence of the Reid Group to an emphasis on closing personal parishes. She thinks the closures are an example of a broader power grab on the part of church hierarchy, a decades-long move away from a structure that grants the laity an essential role in parish administration. In recent years, that loss of power had profoundly struck her.
“About five years ago, I really had my own faith crisis because of this. I went for a number of years very close to throwing in the towel, so to speak, in different ways, and I really had to pray about it and I really suffered as a result of it,” she said. “But what happened was as I kept working with the laity and I would walk with them in the pain, they taught me to walk in the pain.”

Kuenstler found that when churches were closed, the laity often gained a renewed enthusiasm and camaraderie. In some measure, she said, laypeople across the country could take back some of their power by appealing to the Vatican to overturn the decision their diocese had made.

“I had to do what I could do and would be with them, walk with them,” Kuenstler said. “And the consolation I receive as a result is watching the laity become aware that they have a voice, learn how to use that voice and to never again be silenced by any of this.”

In the many rosaries, prayer vigils and protests that occurred after the closures, women were often at the forefront, in contrast to the male-only hierarchy of the clergy. Men often attend the rosaries and assist in organization, but at Our Lady of Peace and St. Roch, as well as several other parishes, women took the lead role in the response. Kuenstler found it unsurprising when she considered the role that women play in the church as laypeople.

“Men in the church, the clergy…they do the sacramental work. It’s the women that go out and feed the sick, clean the church, teach children and raise money,” she said. “They do the grunt work beyond the one hour of mass. They make sure the church is ready for worship.”

Melissande said that the role women played in the response was a silver lining in what had become, for her, an increasingly oppressive cloud.

“Maybe it’s part of a grander picture, and I keep trying to find meaning in madness and sadness,” she said. “Perhaps it was something that had to happen for women to not only step up because they needed to, but feel that empowerment and the show it to the leaders, so perhaps it could be a positive transition for women in the church.”

Melissande smiled. “Wouldn’t that be excellent?”

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Sunday, Nov. 29, 2015

All of the churches that filed appeals to the Vatican were still waiting for a response throughout November. The parishioners who filed the appeals would receive a letter that upheld or overturned the closures, though the decision could also be delayed. Some decisions had been already been delayed multiple times, and Kuenstler was frank about the possibility of success.
“I always have hope, but hope is not assurance. Hope is just hope,” she said. “To argue against a decree of merger is extremely difficult.”

So when Virginia received a letter about St. Roch’s merger from the Congregation of the Clergy in Rome on Monday, Nov. 24, she didn’t immediately open it.

“I was scared to ruin my Thanksgiving!” she said, laughing.

As the parishioner who filed the appeal for St. Roch, she was the contact person for the church (and, she joked, the most likely target for excommunication). She opened the envelope and took a picture of the letter without reading it. She then sent it to another parishioner who would tell her if it was good news.

The parishioner texted back that the decision was delayed until Feb. 15, 2016. Each church that appealed received the same letter, including Our Lady of Peace.

Virginia broke the news during a rosary held inside the narrow vestibule of St. Roch that acted as the parish entrance. Parishioners held rosaries every day, but Virginia decided that they should move inside when the temperature dropped. Approximately 35 parishioners filled the room, joining their voices in a plaintive, melodic rendition of “Santa Maria.”

Unlike Our Lady of Peace, the locks to St. Roch have not been changed and parishioners are still able to enter, though masses cannot be held there. These vigils are held only in the vestibule, and Virginia said that some parishioners were hesitant to even look into the church through its wide and wooden double doors; they are scared to defy Cardinal Dolan’s decree that St. Roch is closed.

As parishioners shivered from the chills that pervaded the air each time the front doors were opened, Virginia stepped before them to say that she intended to fight, just as she’d done one year earlier. She spoke in Spanish, and when she said that the decision was delayed, the crowd applauded. Virginia smiled.

“Lo que quiero decírles es que seguimos vivos,” she said. I want to tell you we are still alive.