

Church occupation ends in Worcester, Mass.

Protests are likely to continue there

WORCESTER, Mass. (CNS) — Dissident parishioners left a Worcester church peacefully June 23, ending a 13-month occupation that was called "unbelievably unfortunate" and "a tragic episode."

Police escorted about 45 members of the Committee to Save St. Joseph's from the closed St. Joseph Church without incident after Superior Court Judge Thomas Connolly said they could face jail or fines if they defied an order to vacate the building.

Committee members had kept up a 24-hour occupation of the church since it was merged with Notre Dame des Canadiens Parish in May 1992. Protests were expected to continue outside the church.

Bishop Timothy J. Harrington of Worcester had offered to reopen the 67-year-old church if parishioners could show they have the funds to repair and maintain it at no cost to the diocese. But he said discussion of that possibility had to wait until all the dissidents had left the church.

Ruling against the protesters June 23, Connolly said it was nevertheless "an unbelievably unfortunate and sad situation." Diocesan attorney Samuel R. DeSimone said the occupation marked "a tragic episode in the history of the church."

At least one court battle over the church's fate was likely to continue.



Gary Anger (left) carries a sofa bed into St. Joseph's Church in Worcester, Mass., on June 22, as parishioners prayed outside the building's entrance. Anger's mother, Loretta, was one of about 50 parishioners who took part in a yearlong occupation of the Catholic Church to keep it open.

The state Supreme Judicial Court agreed to hear an appeal of a lower court's ruling that the church belongs to the bishop, but its hearing of the case was not expected until next fall.

Also pending was a decision from the Apostolic Signature, the church's supreme court, on whether Bishop Harrington acted improperly in merging the two parishes. The Vatican Congregation for the Clergy has ruled that the bishop acted properly, but the

dissident group appealed.

A large crowd of sympathizers, estimated at about 600, greeted the dissidents as they left the church. Some in the crowd then walked to the diocesan chancery, following a man who carried a 12-foot cross topped by a crown of thorns.

Bishop Harrington, who was heckled when he tried to address the protesters, said at a news conference that it had been a "day of heartbreak" for him.

"It was painful for me to hear the shouting and jeering of the people for whom I am bishop," he said. "It is not easy, but that is my pastoral responsibility — to make difficult decisions even when I know that people will not agree with me."

The bishop proposed the formation of a committee comprising five members of the Save St. Joseph's Commit-

tee, five members of the merged parish's council and five of his representatives to continue the dialogue.

He said the group could meet July 15 and every two weeks thereafter to "go in and settle our differences, as church, within the church and without the law."

Initial reaction to the proposal from Ronald Fortin, chairman of the Save St. Joseph's Committee, was mixed. "We're always willing to talk. This is a surprise to me," he said. "I'll believe it when I get an invitation in the mail and a definite date to meet. But I think it'll turn out just like this."

Worcester Superior Court Judge James E. McHugh had ordered the protesters out of the church June 3 and told Bishop Harrington to protect the church building and heat and ventilate it to avoid excessive deterioration while the court battles continued. But the eviction order was stayed several times and protesters were given a last chance to leave voluntarily June 23.

Bishop Harrington said in an interview with *The Catholic Free Press*, Worcester's diocesan newspaper, that it was the courts and not himself who decided that St. Joseph Church had to be vacated.

"The judge said it was more unsafe than I realized," he said, adding that the company that insures the building had reduced insurance coverage from more than \$2.3 million to \$850,000.

But Giselle Desroches, spokeswoman for the Save St. Joseph's Committee, disagreed. "This day will go down in infamy," she said. "Bishop Timothy J. Harrington did this to us. It wasn't the judge, it wasn't the court, it wasn't the police. He did it. He has evicted his flock."

Desroches said the committee has more than \$622,500 in pledges which could be collected if those who want to keep the church open were allowed to fix it up. The diocese has estimated repair costs at up to \$1 million.

Pope calls killing of bishop in El Salvador 'barbaric' act

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II said the slaying of Salvadoran Bishop Roberto Joaquin Ramos Umana was a "barbaric murder" in a country where too much blood has already been shed.

The 55-year-old bishop, head of the military ordinariate in El Salvador, was killed June 25 by outlaws as he rode in a car from the Comalapa airport to San Salvador, the El Salvadoran capital. The route is notorious for nighttime holdups.

The pope, speaking at a Sunday blessing at the Vatican June 27, expressed his deep sadness at the prelate's death. He said he joined the rest of the Salvadoran church in prayer.

The pope said he begged God that "no more blood may be shed in El Salvador, where too much has been spilled and where there is still great suffering."

He said the entire Latin American church was still mourning San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered in 1980, and Mexican Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo, shot dead in May in the Guadalajara, Mexico, airport in what was reportedly an attempt by one gang to assassinate a prominent member of a rival mob. Questions are still being raised about that shooting.

Reports said Bishop Ramos died en route to a military hospital after he was shot in the head. He was returning from Costa Rica, where he had participated in a meeting of family and youth pastoral directors.

Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas told the Italian newspaper *Avvenire*

that he thought the bishop was a victim of common banditry, which he said has continued to plague the Salvadoran countryside following the civil war.

However, the archbishop's human rights office, Tutela Legal, has rejected the robbery motive, but says it is impossible to determine whether the assailants knew who their victim was.

Archbishop Rivera Damas also said Bishop Ramos had spoken out frankly about the conduct of certain military officers.

The bishop moved about freely without bodyguards or security measures, and was not known to have received death threats, Archbishop Rivera Damas said.

Meanwhile, Salvadoran church leaders have called for an investigation into the death of Bishop Ramos.

In his June 27 homily, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador condemned the murder, calling it one more example of the "blind violence" plaguing El Salvador.

In a statement June 27, the Salvadoran bishops' conference condemned the killing of the bishop and called on the government to take steps to guarantee public safety.

According to the Tutela Legal report, insufficient police presence on the highway is to blame for the high incidence of crime in the area. The report also criticizes what it calls "slowness and negligence" on the part of the authorities to begin the investigations.

In a press conference following his homily, Archbishop Rivera Damas told reporters that Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani had promised a probe of the murder.

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