A PROPOSAL TO RENOVATE THE HISTORIC ST. MARTIN DE TOURS CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ST. MARTINVILLE LEADS TO RESIGNATION OF ITS PRIEST.

Religious history and cultural preservation.

The proposed renovation of St. Martin de Tours Church in St. Martinville, Louisiana, has sparked controversy among the parishioners and the local community. The renovation, which started in 1973, has been criticized by some parishioners, including James B. Akers, who was a member of the parish council. Akers' objections are said to have been so strong that the Diocese of Lafayette appointed a replacement, Father Stephen Laliberte, to serve as the new pastor.

The renovation of the church, which dates back to the late 1830s, includes the replacement of cypress pews, relocation of the choir, and the relocation of the church altar. The project has been funded through personal donations and has involved city funds.

The letter, written by Father Laliberte, states that the renovation is meant to preserve the church for future generations. It highlights the cultural importance of the church and its role as a symbol of the parish's heritage.

The local community has shown support for Father Laliberte, expressing their love for the church and its structure. Some have criticized the renovation, arguing that it goes against the church's historic nature.

Inez Gauthier, a parishioner, wrote a letter to the editor of The Teche News expressing her support for Father Laliberte and the renovation project. She writes, "What a loss to St. Martin de Tours and to the City of St. Martinville when our Fr. Steve will no longer be with us. When we see what he has accomplished with the Rectory, he could have done with the Church.

The internal changes proposed were definitely more involved than some paint and some flower beds, however. Included was to be the moving of the church altar forward, necessitating the removal of the first three or four rows of pews and the relocation of the choir. The old cypress pews were to be ripped out and replaced with new pewsmade of cypress. Three or four rows of pews and the relocation of the choir. The old cypress pews were to be ripped out and replaced with new pewsmade of cypress.

For his part, Akers says he was not even a member of the St. Martin de Tours parish, as has been frequently pointed out to him since the whole affair began, but he once worked for the church and was involved in its major restoration project in 1973 and 1974. Akers, now living in Baton Rouge, heard of proposed changes to the church which concerned him enough to fire a letter to The Teche News.

"This building is not only the seat of your religion and your worship of God; it is the visible link with your past," the letter read in part. "The church is a living symbol of our heritage, the lasting symbol of your French, Spanish and Acadian culture, which God has given to our care, to preserve for future generations."

The following Sunday, Jan. 14, Father Stephen Laliberte read the letter sentence by sentence during services, refuting each of Akers' criticisms. Then, without warning, he announced his resignation. Almost as quickly, the Diocese of Lafayette appointed a replacement, not from within Laliberte's own Capuchin order, but from the ranks of the diocese itself.

Laliberte did not respond to a call from The Times, and other figures in the controversy, with the exception of Akers, declined to comment. Debate has continued to rage within the letters columns of The Teche News however, and sources in St. Martinville agree on circumstances and on the depth of emotion stirred among the parishioners and throughout the town.

For his part, Akers says he was only voicing his opinion in a public forum. "Nobody wanted to kick the priest out," he says. "That was never the intention. We just wanted to have some say so.

ST. MARTIN DE TOURS IS THE OLDEST church parish in southwest Louisiana. Its first pastor was a Capuchin who settled with the first group of Acadian exiles in 1765; parts of the church building date back to the late 1830s. The old cypress pews with doors on one end, according to a history of the church, were once a key source of revenue, as families rented them by the year.

The large rectory was supposedly built during the 1850s in hopes that St. Martinville would be designated as the seat of the new diocese, although that honor eventually went to Lafayette.

Laliberte, a New Englander, came to St. Martinville about three years ago. Known around town as "Father Steve," he has won praise for his efforts to beautify the church exterior and the church square, as well as his improvements to the rectory which is now considered a showpiece. Citizens tell of his contribution of personal funds and his willingness to climb on ladders with workmen.

You have only to look across the street to see the work that Fr. Steve and a few volunteers have done to improve the looks of our Main Street," wrote Inez Gauthier, a trustee and a member of the church's parish council. "There is so much more to be done to keep the historical Main Street as it should be.

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Gordon Delcambre, the president of the parish council, declined to comment on the controversy except to say that the plans were just that—plans which had not been finalized nor approved by the diocese. "Everyone jumped the gun," he said.

Akers' objections are extremely detailed, but his main concerns have to do with intent and implications. The renovation of 1973-74, he says, was meant to bring St. Martin de Tours and the replica from the same

ST. MARTIN DE TOURS

CHURCH HISTORY

FLUNKING THE TEST: Lafayette usually gets a gold star when the Louisiana Department of Education rates state school systems, but last week it got a slap on the wrist. State Superintendent of Schools Wilmer Cody said that Lafayette was among seven school systems which have ignored state policy requiring smaller class sizes in early elementary grades. Cody said the pupil-teacher ratio actually increased in the seven districts. Lafayette Superintendent Allen Meyers said that the system was unable to find enough teachers to meet the targeted reductions. He denied that class sizes had increased in the parish since last year.

FOOTNOTES

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