

New Orleans Archdiocese shuts historic church

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW ORLEANS—The Archdiocese of New Orleans announced Monday that it would close one of the nation's oldest black Catholic churches for the foreseeable future after protesters interrupted Mass on Sunday.

Protesters, most of whom are not members of St. Augustine's, have been occupying the rectory for a week, saying they will not leave until the parish is reinstated.

Archbishop Alfred Hughes, during a news conference, said he had no choice but to close St. Augustine Church because protesters had desecrated it by interrupting

Mass. It cannot be reopened, he said, until it is consecrated again.

He also ordered those holed up in the rectory to immediately vacate the property. He did not indicate what steps would be taken if the protesters did not voluntarily leave. The parish at St. Augustine's was slated to be merged with larger St. Peter Claver. It wasn't to have its own priest or membership, but the church itself was to remain open for Mass and occasional weddings or funerals until Monday's announcement.

The consolidation was announced as part of the archdiocese's effort to deal

with \$84 million in uninsured losses following Hurricane Katrina, but Hughes said Monday that the primary concern was not financial. St. Augustine's had failed to add many new members or carry out other pastoral functions required of a parish, Hughes said.

"This is a very painful, painful decision to have to make and to implement. I don't take any joy in this," he said.

He also said the church has not been treated any different from others in the archdiocese.

But St. Augustine's has

drawn a lot of attention because it is among the nation's oldest Roman Catholic parishes, founded by white and free people of color in 1841. The free black members of the congregation bought pews in the church so slaves could attend Mass.

The Tremé neighborhood church, which had about 350 families before Hurricane Katrina, remains a racially diverse congregation.

"We're all one. We're diversi-

fied. We're as close to utopia as you get here. There is no color," said parishioner Doretha Augustus, who was standing outside the church where signs were posted saying "Save our parish" and "We shall not be moved."

Parishioners have appealed the decision and plan to take their case to the Vatican if Hughes refuses to overturn the decision.

Sandra Gordon, the president of St. Augustine's pas-

toral council, said that in the meantime, parishioners and protesters would stay at the church.

"We will continue to peacefully occupy the facilities because this is our parish. It is the property of the congregation, not the archdiocese," she said, trembling as she read a statement on Monday.

On the Net: Archdiocese of New Orleans: www.arch-nj.org

Former SWV front woman strikes out on her new path: Gospel music

By Cheris F. Hodges

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Known for sultry 1990s hits like "Downtown" and "Weak," Cheryl "Coko" Clemons was the lead singer of the group SWV (Sisters With Voices).

Now she's turned in her secular singing card to record her first gospel album. Clemons signed with Artemis Gospel to release her gospel debut.

"I've never left the church," said Clemons. "I've always been active in my church despite my profession in R&B music. Church was more than a breeding ground for me to sing, it's where I nurture my soul. It's a lifestyle for me."

Clemons said she isn't worried about a backlash because of her SWV days. "I don't think about all of that stuff," she said. "People are going to find something to talk about. It's not like everyone singing gospel music was perfect all their lives, you know what I mean?"

Singing gospel professionally isn't new for Clemons. She

has appeared on The Lord's Church Cathedral Choir's project "Some How, Some Way" and "Midnight" with Brent Jones and T.P. Mobb.

Clemons began her singing career at the age of 12 as a member of the New York Community Choir. She was also a member of Hezekiah Walker's Love Fellowship Crusade Choir. "If it were up to my mother, I would have never left singing gospel," Clemons said.

SWV, which was comprised of Leanne "LeLee" Lyons and Tamara "Taj" Johnson, who is married to former NFL player Eddie George.

SWV disbanded in 1999 and Clemons released a mildly successful solo album, "Hot Coko."

At the time of the breakup, she told MTV radio that the group was going through some changes and the women had "communications problems. The unity was gone and the friendship was gone, basically."

Last year, however, the women performed together

on the "New Jack City" tour.

Clemons said the women have made up and they are now extremely close. "They are very supportive," she said. Though Lyons and Johnson aren't slated to appear on Clemons' record, she said they will be around at shows to lend support.

Clemons' untitled gospel album will be released in August.

Clemons said that if she were to sing R&B again, she'd sing the love songs that she sings to her husband.

"I don't see anything wrong with that, because I am glad that God brought him into my life and I don't mind expressing my love to him," she said.

Clemons added that she hopes people won't judge her and accepts what she has to offer on her new album.

"Singing gospel is about spreading good news and letting people know that God is real and out there for you," she said.

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April, 2006 Newsletter - Part I

My Dear Friends:
The greatest thing in all this world is just to know Christ as your Lord and your Saviour. Do you know Him? Those of us who know Him do not know the full meaning of that great eternal truth. When God saved me back there 34 years ago, I stood amazed. All my sin burden was gone. The pit of noise was gone. The Lord flooded my heart with a joy and peace I had never known. I cannot tell the greatness of salvation in Christ, for I am feeble and clay. There are no words in all the languages of the world to tell of the greatness of Christ and what it means to know Him. Spring testifies of the resurrection of Christ. The sinner being resurrected to new life in Christ. I was dead, but God raised me from the dead. He quickened me together with Christ. (Eph. 2:5) He justified me by His grace and Blood. (Rom. 5:9,21) If you knew what it means to know Christ, you would not run around here saying "I accepted Jesus as my Saviour". That is the concrete evidence you know literally nothing about Christ and His death on the Cross for sinners. And the Easter Babylonian celebration has nothing in the world to do with the Crucifixion of Christ. Easter is a pagan goddess. There are two truths that go side by side throughout God's eternal Word: election and reprobation. Down through the years, since God commissioned me to teach His Word, I've brought several studies on these two great truths. If you have learned these two great truths, election and reprobation, you have made a great advancement in the realm of Divine truth. Both are taught in God's Word. To deny one is to deny the other. To deny one or the other is to call God a liar. You may say you don't see them. One day I didn't, either. When I was in the religious world, teaching as a lost man, I knew nothing of God's elect and God's reprobation.

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