

REASONS FOR THE PARISH NOT PROCEEDING WITH THE GIFT OF THE CONVENT – JUNE 2021

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Dear parishioners – these notes are published for public consumption in order to remove any ignorance or misinformation surrounding the proposed gift of the convent to the parish. The first edition was given to the parish Finance Committee.

A) An architect advised me once to build your building in accordance with your plan. Plan comes first. During 2019/21 the parish had to consider the gift of the convent – we had been given a building but we had no plan.

First a little bit of history: In 2015 the Sisters of Mercy offered the convent building which had been vacated several years before to the parish. The parish at that time did not feel they could afford to purchase it. The figure was around £200,000.

In 2018 the sisters then bequeathed the convent to Sr. Consilio of Cuan Mhuire fame. She hoped to open a rehabilitation centre for recovering alcoholics - sort of 'halfway house' between the Cuan Mhuire centre in Newry and the individual's home. A Mass was celebrated in November 2018 to inaugurate the project.

However right through 2019 nothing happened – no refurbishment took place – and in January 2020 the Cuan Mhuire trustees offered the building to the parish at no cost. They too felt they could not afford to take it on with all the subsequent costs.

In the couple of years since this 'gift' became apparent I have always felt that we have been trying to fit our plan into the building rather than the other way round. We had been gifted a huge building but we did not have a corresponding parish plan which would fit into this building.

B) The parish certainly needs some more space to accommodate the various groups which every parish has. 'Patrick's Place' - refurbished in 2018 - has provided that very adequately but we probably need two or three more rooms to meet the current pastoral needs. One of these

could be a somewhat larger room to allow for a catering facility e.g. tea/coffee after Mass etc. This is something the parish Finance Committee will have to look at in the future.

- C) Bear in mind that during the period 2014-21 St. Michael's centre provided accommodation for a number of non-parish groups – ACCORD, the Naiscoil and an 'after schools' club. Occasionally there were one-off users. While Sinead Rea was manageress she provided a twice weekly lunch which was quite excellent in content and price. There were only two parish users of the centre – St. Joseph's Young Priests' Society and the Apostolic work in all this time – and their use was monthly and bi-annually respectively.
- D) Incidentally both the Naiscoil and the After schools Club have obtained alternative temporary accommodation and have cleared the parish centre of their belongings. Both groups were being heavily subsidised by the parish for their use of the centre – and for several years. ACCORD were a faithful user of the building until 2015 when they moved their operation completely to Tobar Mhuire in Crossgar.
- E) I am aware of the tremendous contribution of St. Michael's centre to the parish in past decades. There is a wonderful legacy of public service and community enrichment. However, the centre has more recently been a haemorrhage on parish finances – literally £16,000 to £18,000 per annum. That could not be allowed to continue.
- F) If we were to take over the convent we would have a huge building which would be far more than our current parish needs. The parish does require a building which by analogy would be a Ford transit van -we don't need a mega tourist bus. It does not make sense to spend money on making the building safe (free of damp, ingress of water, dry rot etc) – and estimated at approximately £160,000 - if we do not need a building of this size in the future. Also, we cannot just refurbish part of the building e.g. one floor and leave the rest of the building vacant – as some have suggested.

- G) It is estimated that it would take between £2 and £3 million to repair the convent and make it fully fit for purpose. Once refurbished it would take at least £40,000 each year to run – caretaker wages, manager wages, heating, light, insurance, rates, general maintenance etc.
- H) In conversations with several priests across the diocese who have relatively new parish halls (all purpose built) none would say that these halls pay for themselves. One parish in the centre of a town manages to make ends meet by charging a fee for all who use their carpark. Another charges for an after schools club (again non- parish) and this just about enables the parish to balance the books.
- I) The days of parishioners using a parish hall for their main recreation activities are sadly long gone – whist drives, American Teas, Nights at the Races, bazaars, bingo, dances etc. We cannot compete with the glitz and lights – and the alcohol - of the downtown establishments nor should we want to. Older parishioners will remember with nostalgia those days and their wonderful memories but young people are generally not interested in the past and its memories. The world of the smartphone and social media has had a massive effect on the perception of parish.
- J) Yes – I personally would love to see a beautiful all purpose built centre adjacent to the church. In principle I am not against such a project but right now I do not see this as feasible. Perhaps my successor will have the funds and the opportunity to carry this forward. CARPE DIEM !
- K) The current parish income is 30-40% down on pre-Covid levels. Will it return? Currently 685 people take envelopes and we are most grateful for their contributions. However, our parish has 13,000 people which is about 3,500 – 4,000 households. Can we see an increase in income from this sector? Bear in mind that every time we have a death in the parish generally speaking we have one less paying contributor. Sadly, that number of 685 diminishes year by year.

- L) The work of the parish in the immediate and long term will be one of evangelisation – bringing back those who have drifted away and indeed inviting for the first time the many people who are culturally Catholic but who come only for funerals and weddings – and maybe at Christmas. As parish priest of this parish I want to be involved in this very necessary work of evangelisation over the remaining years the Lord may give me. I do not want to be burdened with the millstone of fundraising that the convent project would entail year after year.
- M) We have just enjoyed the spectacle that is the Olympics in Tokyo. In 1976 the people of Montreal in Canada had a similar experience but I bet those good folk did not think that their grandchildren would still be paying for the Olympics in their taxes and rates! If you doubt this fact look it up on Google.
- N) Now here is the final KEY POINT. Even if we decided to go ahead with a convent project the diocese will not support us at this time. Financial contributions to the parishes of the diocese are down by 35% and the diocese is not supporting ANY capital expenditure for the foreseeable future – especially one that would be so costly. In financial terms the diocese like everywhere else is facing a recession. When that will end we do not know at this stage.
- O) Bishop Treanor has signed off on this project. Right through the period when the parish representatives were meeting face to face and online with the diocesan team the bishop was kept aware of the issues. He has given his backing to the decision of his CEO. While he obviously leaves the technical and detailed aspects of diocesan planning to his CEO and consultants he is aware of this project and has been consulted on various occasions about it. He is in full agreement with his advisers that it would not be feasible to proceed with the project at this time.

P) As a priest of the diocese I will be obedient to the bishop's decision. I took that vow on ordination day and I renew it with all the other diocesan priests each year on Holy Thursday.

Q) I fully realise that many people will be disappointed by this decision. I also hope that many parishioners will be aware that this is the RIGHT DECISION AT THIS TIME in the life of our parish.

I am more than open to anyone wanting to share their thoughts and opinions with me especially if you think I am wrong. However, this will not be part of a consultation on the feasibility of the convent project. For the time being – and for the foreseeable future – that particular door is closed.

I wish to thank all the previous members of the parish Finance Committee for the many hours of work they put into looking at this project – and others – in the maintenance of the parish. I fully appreciate their commitment and loyalty to the parish.

With deep appreciation and gratitude

FR. JOHN MURRAY