

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF ST. MICHAEL CHURCH, ROCHESTER NY

INTRODUCTION

Rochester was not a city founded by Catholics. This being said, without the contribution of numerous Catholic immigrants who settled in the city during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Rochester as we know it today would not exist. A center of manufacturing on the banks of the Genesee River, Rochester could not have developed as it did during the course of the late nineteenth century without the contributions of numerous Catholic laborers. As the prospect of manufacturing jobs and the promise of a better life many in Europe felt was attached to them drew Catholic immigrants to Rochester, parishes and thus parish churches were built to serve them. While many of Rochester's early parishes were "territorial," i.e. built to serve all of the Catholics residing within their designated geographic boundaries, it was understood by the Diocese of Rochester that the numerous non-English speaking Catholics who settled within the city would greatly benefit from the receipt of the sacraments in their native languages. Thus, numerous personal parishes were established to meet the needs of Catholics from various linguistic backgrounds. One of the personal parishes established by the diocese was St. Michael, created for those Catholics of German extraction residing in the "Butterhole" neighborhood in the northeastern section of the city.

While not the first structure built to serve St. Michael Parish, the present St. Michael Church is without question one of the most historically significant Catholic churches in Central New York. Dedicated on September 29, 1890, St. Michael Church continues to tower over the neighborhood surrounding it, now home to mostly Latino residents. Its interior richly adorned with ornate wooden carvings, stenciled walls and a massive pipe organ which is over 100 years old, St. Michael Church, built by German Catholic parishioners who went into personal debt to erect an ecclesiastical edifice illustrative of their faith in God and their thanks for his blessings in their lives draws the hearts and minds of all exposed to it toward a deeper contemplation of their Catholic faith and their relationship with God. In spite of the changes in the neighborhood surrounding St. Michael Church which have reshaped the configuration of parishes serving this section of the city of Rochester and posed challenges for those which remain including St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Parish of which St. Michael Church is now a part, the church has not lost its ability to positively influence the Catholic faithful resident both in near proximity to it and at points farther afield. This plan seeks to illustrate that it is yet the case that St. Michael Church can continue to serve as a sacred space within the city and Diocese of Rochester, and that it can continue to serve as both a beacon of the Catholic faith and as a place where its adherents can come to pray, even if it is no longer the site of regularly celebrated masses.

It is the desire of the St. Michael Society, a recently formed nonprofit organization, to take responsibility for the continued care and restoration of St. Michael Church as a Roman Catholic sacred space, in order that it can continue to serve as a place of Roman Catholic prayer and the site of the occasional celebration of mass. This organization is prepared to pay the costs associated with the ongoing care of the church and such restoration projects as are necessary in order that the church may continue to exist in a state of good repair and preservation so that it can be accessed by the public. In caring for this church through the payment of all expenses associated with it and through taking

responsibility for ensuring that it is maintained, The Diocese of Rochester and the Parish of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini will be relieved of the burden of caring for a church which it has been stated they do not have the resources to continue to maintain. This arrangement will also allow one of the most historic churches in Central New York to continue to exist as a Roman Catholic sacred space, in order that its presence may both offer a place for those who enter it to pray privately and also serve as a source of inspiration to those who may enter it and contemplate the faith of those who sacrificed so greatly to build it as they consider their own relationship with Catholicism and the church's sacred art and architecture.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ST. MICHAEL SOCIETY AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

The St. Michael Society is presently in the process of incorporating in New York. Once this has been achieved it will be seeking exemption from federal taxation for contributions which it receives under Section 501 C (3) of the federal tax code from the Internal Revenue Service. The organization will be led by a board of directors, in accordance with the laws of the State of New York which set out the requirements as to those who must be chosen by the group to compose a properly constituted corporate board.

With regard to civil and canonical arrangements, it would be possible to implement the plan contained in this document in a variety of ways. Bishop Matano, Ordinary of the Diocese of Rochester, in accordance with Canons 312 and 322 of the Code of Canon Law of 1983 could erect the St. Michael Society as a private association of the Christian faithful, and endow the group with juridic personality. The deed to St. Michael Church could then be transferred to the society (with a reversionary clause allowing it to revert to the ownership of the Diocese of Rochester or its designee if the group failed to care for the church and property included in the deed.) The diocese would maintain supervision over the project as they would continue to control when any sacramental activity occurred in the church (such would be controlled by the Bishop of Rochester or his designee under any of these arrangements, in accordance with the canonical statutes and bylaws Bishop Matano in his capacity as Ordinary of the Diocese of Rochester would approve in conjunction with the society's establishment.)

Another arrangement under which this plan could be carried out would involve The St. Michael Society formally entering into a lease with the Diocese of Rochester or St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Parish for the St. Michael Church property, including the church building. The lease could be granted for a nominal amount (\$1 per year, owing to the fact that the lessee would assume the responsibility for all of the expenses and repairs associated with the church.) In this way, a formal civil relationship would exist between the St. Michael Society and the Diocese of Rochester, which would spell out the responsibilities of both parties. Either of these arrangements would be acceptable to us.

HOW WE WILL UTILIZE AND CARE FOR ST. MICHAEL CHURCH

Our sole interest in caring for and maintaining St. Michael Church is in order to guarantee that it can continue to exist as a Roman Catholic sacred space and place of worship, regardless of how frequently mass would be celebrated within the church. We are aware that the Diocese of Rochester is only

required by canon law (canons 1167 and 1168 of the Pio Benedictine Code of Canon Law of 1917 as incorporated into the present day jurisprudence of the Holy See through the provisions of Canon 2 of the Code of Canon Law of 1983) to permit a maximum of two masses per year within St. Michael Church, one to be celebrated on the anniversary of the dedication of the church as a Roman Catholic place of worship and the other to be celebrated on the Feast of St. Michael (September 29,) the patronal feast day of this church. It just so happens that the day on which St. Michael Church was dedicated in 1890 happens to fall on the Feast of St. Michael. Thus, it may be the case that only one mass is required to be celebrated within St. Michael Church on an annual basis. If we were able to only receive this one guaranteed mass per year, we would accept this. We would envision a discussion being had between the St. Michael Society and the Diocese of Rochester regarding this topic as part of the reaching of a final agreement on the implementation of this plan.

When the church is not being utilized for the celebration of mass or other sacramental activities, (which we would expect to be most of the time,) we plan to open the church on a routine basis for private prayer. During such times as the church is open, volunteers will remain inside the church in order to ensure that its safety is maintained. We are aware that the Congregation for the Clergy has made clear that regardless of the frequency of “public worship” (mass and other sacramental activities) which occurs within a church, “private worship” (private prayer, recitation of the rosary, and other Roman Catholic devotional activities that do not require a priest,) should only be limited within a church building if there is a cause of extreme gravity which justifies its limitation, on account of the fact that private worship does not require the presence of a member of the clergy. We believe it is important to have the doors of St. Michael Church open as frequently as possible to ensure that Catholics from within the City of Rochester and points farther beyond are able to connect with the church as deeply as possible and to have as much time for private prayer and devotional activities such as the recitation of the rosary as can be provided to them.

By retaining the Church of St. Michael as a Roman Catholic sacred space, we will ensure that the public at large will be aware that the church is a site of Catholic religious activity above all other things. As is the case with many other Catholic church buildings, both within the United States and especially throughout Europe, the St. Michael Society would envision providing opportunities from time to time for individuals to receive a guided tour of the church upon request, in order that they may be exposed to and properly understand its sacred status. Such guided tours of the church would be strictly controlled in order that no abuse of the church’s sacred status would be permitted, and would focus on explanations of the various liturgical elements of a Roman Catholic church building, with special mention being made of those found within St. Michael Church. Our goal is that as many Catholics as possible may visit the church and be renewed in their faith, drawn back to the faith if they have fallen away, or come to the faith if they are not Catholic from their exposure to the church. We would also envision holding regular recitations of the Rosary within St. Michael Church. Given that concerts of strictly sacred music (music connected to Catholic worship) are permitted to be held within Roman Catholic church buildings, we would also envision such concerts being held within the church from time to time, owing to the presence within St. Michael Church of a pipe organ of the highest quality.

COLLECTION OF FUNDS

We are well aware that the central question concerning whether the Church of St. Michael can continue to exist as a Roman Catholic sacred space is whether the money to care for it will be present. Financial concerns of course have led to the church being in the position it presently finds itself. We are prepared to demonstrate that such funds are available. As has been stated, the St. Michael Society is prepared to cover the ongoing expenses associated with St. Michael Church, such as the insurance carried on the church building, utilities associated with the church building including heat, electricity and water, and expenses associated with the routine maintenance of the church. If other structures on the former St. Michael Parish Campus are also transferred to the care of the St. Michael Society, the society will also cover all costs associated with their continued upkeep and maintenance. Additionally, given that the church and other structures associated with it will over time require various capital repairs to be carried out, the St. Michael Society will pay for the completion of these repairs as well.

As part of its broader mission, the St. Michael Society will engage with Catholics both locally and throughout the nation to make them aware of the work we are doing to ensure that St. Michael Church remains a Roman Catholic sacred space. A fundraising campaign, employing a number of different strategies to engage potential donors, will also be undertaken. The target audience for this effort will be broad; Catholics who have an interest in historic churches, who are German American, or who may have a personal connection to the church (given that St. Michael Church is one of the oldest Catholic Churches in Rochester, many people throughout Central New York and Beyond have a family connection to it) will be contacted.

After having extensively discussed our plan with those individuals and entities with which we connect, we will ask them for their financial support. We also may come up with additional strategies for collecting funds, such as appeals made in national Catholic and other media publications. We will continue to engage with contributors on an ongoing basis to ensure they remain committed to our mission, and we will constantly seek out additional potential contributors in order to expand and diversify our funding base to the greatest extent possible. If the rectory, convent and parish hall on the former St. Michael Parish campus are transferred to the St. Michael Society's care, uses for these structures will be sought that both serve the neighborhood in which they are located and also potentially generate funds which can be used to maintain St. Michael Church. The society is not however basing its funding plan upon any revenue generated by ancillary buildings on the former St. Michael Parish campus. We would be happy to discuss our funding plan further with officials of the Diocese of Rochester if that is desired.

PRECEDENTS WE ARE FOLLOWING

As parishes continue to merge across the United States, it is becoming more common to find groups of the Catholic faithful seeking to find new ways in which former parish churches can continue to spread the Catholic faith in the communities in which they are located. Broadly speaking, an increasingly large number of groups dedicated to the preservation of Roman Catholic churches as Roman Catholic sacred places are covering all the expenses associated with their retention after the parishes they were built to

serve have been eliminated. The origins of such arrangements seem to date back several decades. We are aware that the St. Patrick's Church Preservation Society of Catawissa MO cares for St. Patrick's church in that community, located within the boundaries of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and has been doing so since 1972. St. Patrick's parish was merged into a neighboring parish in 1925, but the church has continued to host three masses a year, along with weddings and funerals. Each summer, a picnic is held on the church grounds to raise money for the continued preservation of the church, drawing people from many surrounding states. St. Patrick's church has been completely restored by the preservation society over the past few decades, and the dedication of this group has meant it remains a beacon of the Catholic faith in that part of Missouri, and a tangible testament to the faith of those Catholics who built it.

Similarly, St. Anne's church in Columbia CA, located within the boundaries of the Diocese of Stockton, has been maintained by the St. Anne's preservation Society since 1977. The preservation society pays all of the expenses associated with maintaining the church and mass is still celebrated there a few times a year. The efforts of this committee saved the church from being stripped and demolished, and allowed a church built by those Catholics who came to California during the Gold Rush to survive into the twenty-first century. More recently, The St. Mary of the Rock Preservation Society began caring for St. Mary of the Rock Church in Batesville IN, located within the boundaries of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, after the parish closed at the end of November 2013. Those who wanted St. Mary's to remain a church available for occasional masses stepped forward and took on the responsibility of caring for the church and its grounds, at their own expense. In all three of these cases, agreements worked out between diocesan and archdiocesan ordinaries and those committed to keeping Catholic churches preserved and available for at least occasional mass have led to the preservation of churches at no expense to the parishes and dioceses in which they are located.

The examples cited above are but three of over eighty Catholic churches being maintained across the United States, Canada and Australia today by Catholic Church preservation groups. These agreements have avoided the permanent loss of churches which people are quite attached to, as they have served as the focal point of their spiritual lives, and they have also averted much of the anger which is often directed toward church officials for the permanent closure of a church. These preserved churches are not intended to be museums. Each of them remains a consecrated church, which is visited by the faithful on a regular basis for prayer, outside of times when mass is celebrated within them.

FULLY IN COMMUNION WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Regardless of the arrangement under which St. Michael Church continues to exist as a Roman Catholic sacred space (as a church building not relegated to profane but not sordid use) under the care of the St. Michael Society, neither mass nor any other sacramental activities will be held within the church without the permission of the Bishop of Rochester or such other person as he designates to grant or withhold such permission. Similarly, we will never undertake any activities which in any way deviate from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

THE CANONICAL AND JURISPRUDENTIAL FOUNDATIONS OF OUR PLAN

In April of 2013, the Congregation for the Clergy of the Holy See released an instruction to the bishops of the World regarding the closure of parishes and churches. This document highlighted the differences between the closure of a parish and a church, and made clear the fact that there are differences between when a parish can be merged into another parish, and when a church can be permanently closed. In its instruction, the congregation made clear that a church should remain a sacred space, "if at all possible," and that private funds can be used to maintain a church. We based this plan upon these points. The Vatican has also ordered, in 38 separate cases, that church buildings in 11 different dioceses and archdioceses across the United States be reopened as places of at least occasional public worship and unlimited private devotional activities, following the submission of petitions for hierarchical recourse by parishioners aggrieved at the closure of these churches. All of these decisions have been made since January 2011. The Vatican found that "grave reasons" weren't present in these cases that justified the permanent closure of the church buildings in question.

CONCLUSION

It can be objectively stated that St. Michael Church is one of the most important Roman Catholic church buildings in Central New York. At 130 years in age, built to a design of Adolphus Druiding, St. Michael Church is a concrete link between the German Catholic migration to Rochester and the present day. At this time in history when Catholicism has so greatly weakened both in Rochester and in the world more broadly, it is the belief of the St. Michael Society that St. Michael Church can serve as a means of evangelization merely through its presence, that its sacred art and architecture can in and of themselves strengthen the faith of those who enter the church and view it. The construction of this church concretely represents the deep faith of the German Catholics who built a house of God in which they could practice their faith and through its construction give thanks to God for all of the graces he bestowed upon them as they built lives in a land far from that of their birth.

Now, over one and a quarter centuries after its construction, St. Michael Church, having stood as a beacon of the faith through twenty-three presidential administrations, as a witness to those men from its congregation who have answered the call to defend this nation in each of its times of greatest need since the Spanish American War, having served as a place of prayer after two of our presidents were cut down by the bullets of assassins, having stood witness to Rochester's Rise and its present troubles, stands at the edge of a proverbial cliff. The choice is stark; will those who seek to take on the care of this sacred space at their own expense be permitted to ensure that this church through a ministry of presence nourishes the lives of the Catholic faithful for centuries to come, or will it now be the case that the sacred character of this historic church will be obliterated.

Allowing the St. Michael Society to move forward with the safeguarding of St. Michael Church's status as a Roman Catholic sacred space and place of worship, preserving the church's sacred character as defined by canon law will ensure that one of Central New York's most historic churches continues to be a Catholic place of at least occasional worship long into the future. We all have the power to shape the future. By giving the St. Michael Society the opportunity to retain St. Michael Church at our own

expense, it will be possible to ensure that a church of unquestioned historic significance remains a Roman Catholic sacred space, and avoid any future questions surrounding the long-term status of the church. We see adoption of this plan as a win for everyone and most importantly a win for God. We pray that the leadership of the Diocese of Rochester will allow us to proceed with this plan.