

NEW JERSEY: Archbishop sells church assets to build himself an indoor swimming pool

Written by Reuters, Jonathan Allen
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NEW YORK (Reuters) – The Roman Catholic archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, is facing mounting criticism over his plan to spend \$500,000, mostly from the sale of church assets, on an extension to a countryside house where he will soon spend his retirement.

Some local Catholics are refusing to contribute to church collections in protest at Archbishop John Myers' planned 3,000-square-foot (280-square-meter) extension, saying he is failing to follow the austerity of both Pope Francis and Jesus Christ.

"It's vulgar ... The church is changing around him," said Kevin Davitt, a parishioner at St Catharine's Church in Glen Rock who has stopped donating to church appeals.

"He loves the pomp and circumstance, he loves the robes. That's his world. There's an obvious tone-deafness about him," said Davitt in a telephone interview.

News of the three-story extension has consumed worshippers in the archdiocese since the plans were first reported by the Newark Star-Ledger two weeks ago. The building will include a library, an indoor exercise pool and what the newspaper described as a hot tub.

The archdiocese has implored parishioners to reconsider their protest.

It says most of the construction funding is coming from the sale of underused church property, along with some private donations, and the house will remain a church asset even after Myers' death.

"By withdrawing their support, who are they harming?" Jim Goodness, the archbishop's spokesman, said in a statement. "The very people that we as a Church are pledged to help."

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STARK CONTRAST

The house was originally bought by the archdiocese in 2002 for \$700,000 and is currently used as a weekend escape from downtown Newark by Myers.

It has five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a three-car garage, an elevator and a swimming pool set in 8 acres of one of New Jersey's more expensive and peaceful corners in Hunterdon County.

The archdiocese said the hot tub the Newark Star-Ledger said would be built in the extension was actually a "therapeutic whirlpool", designed to forestall arthritis and other afflictions of the elderly.

Some Catholics in the diocese think the house is already big enough for Myers, who is due to retire on his 75th birthday in 2016.

They say they cannot square the expenditure with the closure of several Catholic schools in the archdiocese in recent years, nor with the recent example of Pope Francis.

The pope has called for a "poor Church", shunning the Vatican's lavish papal apartments in favor of a guesthouse suite and traveling in a blue Ford Focus rather than in a limousine under guard.

However, Myers is not the only Catholic official to come under recent scrutiny for spending.

In Germany, Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg last year drew criticism for allowing costs for a new residence to run to 31 million euros (\$43 million).

Dubbed "the luxury bishop" by German media, he was later investigated by a court over accusations that he lied under oath about taking a first-class flight to visit poverty projects in India.

"HEDONISM UNDISGUISED"

In a harshly worded editorial about Myers in its latest issue, the National Catholic Reporter said the "arrogance and self-importance" required for such a use of diocese assets was "breathtaking".

"This is clearly the material of episcopal scandal, hedonism undisguised, a level of clerical privilege that knows no bounds," the editorial said.

Goodness, the archbishop's spokesman, defended Myers, calling him "an extremely generous man".

He said the extension was necessary to accommodate the archbishop's post-retirement work, including expected frequent visits from priests, staff and other guests.

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He said its cost was dwarfed by the \$12 million a year the archdiocese spends in financial support to its 70 Catholic elementary schools and the \$3 million it gives to Catholic charities serving the sick, poor and homeless.

“He’s been reading, he’s been hearing,” Goodness said.

“And he’s certainly very upset by those people who are making that knee-jerk decision that they are not going to give. What we keep saying is that this is a prudent use of real estate assets of the diocese.”

The anger, nonetheless, appeared to have rippled into neighboring, financially independent dioceses in New Jersey.

Reverend David O’Connell, the bishop of Trenton, said it was “unfortunate” some Catholics in his diocese now mistakenly thought their donations were “somehow involved in the building project of the Archdiocese of Newark”.

“Not a single penny goes to the Archdiocese of Newark,” he said in a statement on Wednesday, urging them not to withhold their donations.

(Editing by Scott Malone and Sophie Hares)
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