December 22, 2022

Very Reverend Marc Drouin

St Andre Bessette Parish

291 Union Avenue

Laconia, NH 03246

Dear Fr. Marc,

Thank you for distributing a letter to parishioners of St. Andre Bessette Parish concerning the future of St. Joseph Church in Laconia during the weekend of December 11, 2022. We believe several points referenced in the letter warrant response in order that you, the Diocese of Manchester, and the parishioners of St. Andre Bessette parish, as well as the public at large can have an accurate understanding of the issues.

It is implied in your December 9th, letter that the Parish of St. Andre Bessette and by extension the Diocese of Manchester hold something of a monopoly on the right and ability to care for and maintain St. Joseph Church. You state that the “care” of and “responsibility” for St. Joseph Church is held by St. Andre Bessette Parish. You also stated: “The sacredness of our spaces is entrusted to us as a duty of stewardship to uphold; an incredibly important tradition.” We must state as a point of fact what canon law and the jurisprudence of the Holy See make clear: care of and responsibility for former parish churches is most certainly not exclusively reserved to the parishes which gain ownership of them following the merging of parishes. The various canons contained within the Code of Canon Law of 1983 make this clear when they discuss who is able to own sacred goods (including churches). The provisions within the Dicastery for the Clergy in 2013 (see copy attached) further explain guidelines on parish and church closure and church alienation (sale or transfer).

Section 2 and 3 of the dicastery’s guidelines warrant specific mention in this regard. Section 2 discusses the conditions under which a church may be demolished. It also makes clear that all sources of funding (not merely the funds possessed by an entity which owns a church, be it a parish or otherwise) must be found lacking or inadequate prior to it being permissible for financial insufficiency to be cited as a cause to justify the church being demolished. In the case of St. Joseph Church in Laconia, the resources of the parish of St. Andre Bessette are not the sole determining factor as to whether St. Joseph Church has a future as a Catholic sacred space. Furthermore, Section 3 makes clear that in the event an entity which owns a church no longer wishes to do so, its transfer to an entity which will continue to exclusively use it for some level of Catholic worship is always preferred over use of the church for any other purpose, including its sale for uses which are not exclusively associated with Catholic worship. The Holy See makes clear that entities other than those which own a church at a given point in history can come into possession of it without it being demolished. This further indicates that the future of St. Joseph Church in Laconia is not tied exclusively to the strengths or weaknesses of the Parish of St. Andre Bessette.

It is the duty of all Catholics therefore to uphold the sacred nature of our Catholic churches, and to undertake the stewardship necessary to ensure their sacred nature is maintained perpetually. Please understand, it is not the desire of the St. Joseph Church Preservation Society, or of any of its members or officers to deprive St. Andre Bessette Parish of the right to maintain St. Joseph Church; the parish has the right to do this if it wishes to do so. Each and every one of us has said this from day one of our involvement in this situation. When you state in your letter however that the resources of St. Andre Bessette Parish “could not adequately address all the repairs” which St. Joseph Church requires, we cannot stand idly by and allow discussions concerning the future of St. Joseph Church to proceed from the incorrect premise that the church’s existence as a Catholic sacred space is exclusively dependent on the parish. So too is it the case that the number of individuals attending mass within St. Andre Bessette Parish has no bearing on the future of St. Joseph Church.

When you state that stewardship on the part of St. Andre Bessette Parish in recent years concerning St. Joseph Church has been “wanting,” one would think you would welcome the assistance of other Catholics who wish to ensure that St. Joseph Church is not relegated to profane but not sordid use. If St. Andre Bessette Parish is not able or willing to expend the resources necessary to restore and maintain St. Joseph Church as a Catholic sacred space going forward, the St. Joseph Church Preservation Society would be happy to assume ownership of and responsibility for the church in order that it can maintain its Catholic sacred character. Canon law and the jurisprudence of the Holy See make clear we have the right to do this so long as we guarantee the church will be used exclusively for Catholic sacred purposes, something we have pledged to do. We have never stated this is the only arrangement we would enter into with St. Andre Bessette Parish, however it might very well be the easiest solution to this situation in our opinion to implement. It is unfortunate that instead of welcoming offers of assistance from the St. Joseph Church Preservation Society you have stated in your letter (so far as we are aware without knowledge of our resources) that the society lacks the funds necessary to undertake repairs to the church and maintain it going forward. Your statement in this regard is not accurate.

Based on your statements that the resources of St. Andre Bessette Parish are limited, we are sorry you expended funds on studies of assessments of mold within St. Joseph Church, as well as the church’s heating system and masonry. We assured you on multiple occasions earlier this year that the St. Joseph Church Preservation Society was prepared to assume care and responsibility for the church regardless of its condition. As shown in the list of repairs you included with your letter, not all of the repairs which St. Joseph Church may require must be completed immediately. Indeed, it is the case that some of these repairs can be safely undertaken several years from now. Your cost projections likewise do not take into consideration cost savings which can be achieved through the donation of labor, materials, or both, something, based on other projects of this type we are aware of, we believe would likely occur in this case. Efforts to undertake historic restoration almost never begin with every penny needed for their completion in hand. This is why such efforts are broken into phases, just as the scope of repairs for St. Joseph Church you included in your letter was. To state that the St. Joseph Church Preservation Society is incapable of taking responsibility for St. Joseph Church based on an incomplete knowledge of our resources and a phased repair schedule whose cost has increased is at best not conducive to productively moving forward with regard to the future of the church.

Fr. Marc, we have sought since we first approached you to jointly arrive at a solution which will ensure that St. Joseph Church is preserved. We continue to wish to proceed in this way; we believe doing so will bring about the best possible outcome for St. Andre Bessette Parish and for all who care about this magnificent historic Catholic sacred space. We pray that open communication can resume between us in the near future in this regard, in order that all issues which are of concern to you and to us can be placed on the table, and systematically addressed. A protracted dispute over the future of St. Joseph Church will not benefit anyone, most certainly not St. Andre Bessette Parish. We recommit ourselves to this work in this season of Christmas. We also pray that you have a truly blessed Christmas.

Sincerely,

Linda D. Normandin

Linda D. Normandin, President

Attached: “Official Documents of the Holy See: Letter from the Congregation for the Clergy and Procedural Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes and the Closure, Relegation and Alienation of Churches”, dated April 30, 0213.

cc: St Joseph Church Preservation Society board: Karen Sullivan, Mary Jane Wood, Robert F. Smith, Paul J. Gaudet Sr., Donna Gaudet Hosmer, Andrew J. Hosmer, and Dianne Castrucci

Most Reverend Peter Anthony Libasci,

Most Reverend Christophe Yves Louise George Pierre

Brody Hale, Esq. Canonical Advisor