

## **Response to Feedback received in response to the announcement regarding the closing of Saint Mary Church.**

We recognize that it was difficult for many to hear the announcement of the closing of Saint Mary Church and are grateful for all the feedback that was expressed. We decided to let the effects of the announcement regarding Saint Mary Church settle with people for a bit before following up with more of the details of our announcement for people personally and for our parish. Eighteen emails with feedback from parishioners were received in the first week (up through August 10). Of the eighteen emails we received, we have responded to the seven common concerns and observations.

### **Sadness, Heartbreak, Sadness though Expected and Sadness with Understanding**

Most if not all the feedback communications expressed a sense of sadness or heartbreak. We would expect nothing less. Churches, like homes, hold many emotions and memories of significant occasions in our lives. Churches are also the sacred places in which our relationship with God was started and nurtured. Of the three churches in our parish, Saint Mary holds such a memory for Fr. Aveni. Saint Mary was the first church in Billerica that Fr. Aveni celebrated Mass in, when he celebrated his uncle's funeral in 2006. Saint Mary Church has a 93-year history of feeding the people of God over the years first as a mission and eventually as a parish. Bishop Hennessey expressed it well as he stated that the sadness being felt comes from the fact that "Saint Mary Church (building) has fulfilled its pastoral mission well since it was built as a mission church of Saint Andrew in 1928." Therefore, the announcement of the building closing is not meant to express failure, but rather the success and fulfillment of her ministry and mission.

Realizing the decline of the building over the years and the inability to adequately address the growing issues effectively, some parishioners expressed a sense of expectation and understanding regarding the announcement along with sadness. There have also been concerns expressed that Saint Mary (and Saint Theresa for that matter) is not able to fully provide for the increasing needs for specialized access to our building and facilities of the people in our parish community, with our existing ramp. Some of the feedback sympathized with Fr. Aveni that it was on his watch that this difficult decision must be made. It is safe to say that not many priests or bishops want to be the person to decide to close a church building, even in cases where the decision at hand best serves the parish community.

### **A lot is happening quickly in our parish. Merging parishes and closing churches was the reason Fr. Aveni was sent to Billerica.**

No one will deny that the past two years have been like none other in most of our memories, and the past 20 years have had their challenges not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but many other denominations and religions. The Covid pandemic has had unforeseen and abrupt challenges to many lives, individually, as families, businesses and yes, churches too. In April (Holy Week) 2019 Fr. Aveni was invited by Cardinal Sean to serve as pastor of the three parishes of Billerica. With no further information or details about the assignment, Fr. Aveni accepted the Cardinal's invitation. Soon after his appointment and after arriving as the pastor, he became aware of some long-term and short-term challenges that our three parishes were experiencing. With those challenges and the challenges of the pandemic Fr. Aveni remains honored and committed to serve as pastor. The pre-existing challenges with properties, finances and human resources and the challenges that the pandemic brought, our parish has had to give immediate attention to some of the most urgent challenges. Though the pastor is ultimately the person to make the decision to recommend closing of a church and relegating it to profane use, this particular decision came from numerous discussions with the Finance Council, and the Building Committee in

concert with the parish staff assessing the different approaches and solutions. We are grateful to these dedicated parishioners for their advice and counsel around this difficult decision.

### **Support for the Decision**

In the eighteen responses we received, there were, in fact, some expressions of support for the decision we had made. One person wrote “This decision is long overdue and the right one” and another wrote “I write to congratulate you on making what was surely a painful decision with regards to St. Mary’s Parish...I don’t expect this to be the last decision like this, either... I just wanted to voice support of this move.” Both responses included expressions of sadness.” The parish pastoral and finance councils, building committee and staff of Saint Matthew appreciate the support that accompanies this difficult decision.

### **What happens to donated items**

Beginning in 1928 Saint Mary has been blessed with the generosity of her parishioners for the land, building and furnishings of their church. Saint Mary started as the present lower church, completed the main (upper) church in 1936 and the wing in 1966. Many generous souls donated most of the furnishing with the intention that they be used for the worship or God. When our three parishes came together as one in August 2020, all the profits (property and assets) and liabilities (debt and payables) of the three parishes were assumed by the new Saint Matthew Parish. Therefore, all of the donated items and furnishings remain the property of Saint Matthew Parish. To honor the intentions of the original donors, some of the furnishings will be incorporated into the churches of Saint Matthew Parish now and in the future. The remaining items will be stored, for future use in Billerica or in other Catholic church communities either locally or in missions for the use of worship, for which they were originally intended.

### **Where do the Proceeds of the Sale Go?**

As with the donated items, the three properties became the assets of Saint Matthew Parish in August 2020. When land and buildings of a Parish are sold, the parish (in this case Saint Matthew) retains 82% of the capital gain and 18% is remitted to the Archdiocese of Boston. In most cases, the Archdiocese likely provided a portion of the seed money for new churches and parishes years before, and support over the years. Within the past 10 years, Saint Mary benefited from over \$100,000 from the Archdiocese via a grant in 2017 and the forgiveness of \$60,000 of debt at the time of consolidation in 2020. Though some may not be aware of this, these transactions were both publicized in Annual Financial Reports. The Archdiocese will provide the real estate and legal services at the time of the sale.

### **Did we Consider other Solutions, such as Subdividing and Fund Raising?**

As mentioned earlier, there have been hours of consultation with the councils and committees of our parish to discuss all aspects of parish life, including property conditions, finances, and the pastoral needs of the people. In the area of properties, immediate repairs needed in all our buildings are extensive and the costs are prohibitive. When a public building (other than a private residence) does extensive repair or renovation that is more than 30% of its assessed value, over a three-year period, they are required to satisfy all the current building codes. The work needed at Saint Mary church would require assuring accessibility to all persons to all levels (including the sanctuary and choir loft) which would require an elevator, and accessible restrooms. Additionally updating electrical and fire safety systems to the current codes would be required. This burden would likely be on us to do this work if we were to rent or lease the building. Subdividing the property would not afford us the necessary resources to do the work that is needed. The annual financial report video explained that our three parishes had been operating on a deficit or near deficit for over 10 years, which had depleted savings in each parish to make up the

difference. Even if we could raise the funds to address the work, which is doubtful if we are unable to provide for standard (minimum) operations, it would also be unlikely that we could continue the upkeep and maintenance of all of our buildings. Deferred maintenance along with decreased contribution in our three parishes is what likely contributed to operating deficits over time.

**Why were Saint Andrew and Saint Theresa churches not included in the announcement?**

When the newly formed Building Committee came together a year ago, our first task was to assess the condition of all seven buildings of that parish (counting the former Saint Theresa Parish Center and Rectory two separate buildings) and devise a comprehensive maintenance and repair plan. The committee was asked to consider all possibilities for the future without prejudice. Realizing the overwhelming concerns especially in the three churches, it didn't take long for the idea of exploring the possibility of building a new church to come forward. In March 2021 Kevin Connelly from property management at the Archdiocese of Boston began an extensive study of our buildings, reporting all needed repair and maintenance and dividing them into three categories: Immediate Need, 3-5 years, and recommended. The condition and work necessary of all three churches indeed justified considering the alternative of building a new church. Following Kevin's work, we have begun to consult with an architect to determine if it is feasible to build a new church. As we explore that option, we will be able to better determine the future directions of Saint Andrew and Saint Theresa.

We are grateful for the feedback we have received since announcing the closing of Saint Mary Church. Knowing the news was difficult to hear at many levels, it is our hope that we have addressed and clarified the concerns expressed in the feedback we have received via email, US Mail, and verbally. With your help, as it has been in this exchange, we will continue to make every effort to communicate information in a timely and transparent manner regarding our parish and the work of the Church in Billerica.