

The Parish of Our Lady of the Rosary Bexhill-on-Sea

St Mary Magdalene's, Town Centre & St Martha's, Little Common

Parish Clergy: Fr Simon Dray, Fr Rajesh Minz, Deacon Simon Kirkdale
St Mary Magdalene's Presbytery, Sea Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex. TN40 1RH
Tel: 01424 210263

Email: stmm@btconnect.com
Parish Website: www.stmmbexhill.co.uk

5th October 2020

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Re: New accommodation for the priests of the parish

When the Rosminians left and handed over the monastery-style presbytery, the diocesan priests moved in. Over time, the house has been used more and more as an office and a pastoral centre, with the priests retreating upstairs.

Since 2000, there has been relatively little done to address the living accommodation. Most of the focus has been on the pastoral activity, so that many groups prefer it to St Mary Magdalene Hall. The lack of boundaries has led to a significant loss of privacy to the priests and a greater risk to an information breach under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) from the office areas.

The house in its current usage and lack of boundaries also poses a safeguarding consideration as there is currently nothing to stop a young person or a vulnerable adult straying into the residential areas of the presbytery. The new 2020 framework on safeguarding expects us to:

'respect and maintain the boundaries appropriate to our relationships with every person... requiring that we observe proper spiritual, physical, sexual, emotional and psychological boundaries in every respect of our conduct and in the exercise of our ministry'¹.

Having identified that the physical boundaries of the presbytery may not be robust enough, we should mitigate them promptly.

¹ 4:1.5-5a Pastoral Standards and Safe Conduct in Ministry

In addition, we are required to *'provide... a physically safe environment in our churches, parish halls and other facilities. This requires that we ensure that our places of worship and the facilities for which we hold responsibility are maintained and compliant with the requirements of statutory health and safety legislation'*.²

To this end, when the Coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown was announced, the parish office was closed, and all pastoral activity suspended in the presbytery. The risk assessment to bring back the administrators exposed the lack of boundaries and the risks of one building housing a residence, office, and pastoral centre.

When Bishop Richard and Sarah Kilmartin, the Chief Operating Officer visited me in July, they recognised the presbytery accommodation was no longer adequate, and wished to support ways to ensure the on-going mental well-being of the priests.

As you already know from her letter to the parish of 16th July 2020, released with the 2019 accounts, the Chief Operating Officer said,

'we have discussed that the parish will use its share of the proceeds of this sale to attend to the clergy accommodation issues. The Chair of the Diocesan Finance Committee has indicated that the committee would welcome a request for an advance from the Diocese so that these issues can be addressed without awaiting the outcome of the Sidley sale'.

If the presbytery were to remain as a residence it would need a complete refurbishment and restructuring, and this would likely be expensive and may not actually achieve what is required in terms of boundaries. Bishop Richard and Sarah Kilmartin recognized that the priority for the building should be the parish office and the pastoral activities, seeing the potential of it, in time, becoming a Deanery resource as part of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, *'the Word who is Life'*.

Bishop Richard and Sarah Kilmartin agreed that the priests should seek alternative accommodation.

² 4:2.1 Pastoral Standards and Safe Conduct in Ministry

As St Martha's and Our Lady of the Rosary have always been part of the wider Bexhill Parish there are no spare presbyteries in the parish. Therefore, they authorised me to look for new accommodation. Two modestly priced flats, offered without chain, were identified near the Church and after viewing them, they were assessed as suitable.

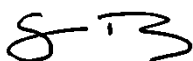
With the authority of the Bishop, the Chair of the Diocesan Finance Committee and the approval of the Trustees, an advance on the sale of the site of Sidley has been authorised. We all believe that this is an appropriate use of the Sidley money: it deals with capital expenditure; it invests in an asset and is not lost into the operational budget which we should aim to balance by offertory giving. In addition, any charitable ventures within the community should continue to be funded out of the charity and poor funds held by the parish, and the various second collections throughout the year.

Yes, of course, there will be some additional on-going costs which will need to be budgeted and accounted for in the operational budget, which in the short term may be an additional challenge. As you know from the 2019 Finance Statement released in August 2020, we have taken steps to mitigate the financial impact and the parish is grateful to those who have continued their weekly offertory and especially those who have moved to on-line giving.

Therefore, just before I went on holiday in September, the diocese, on our behalf, made offers on the two flats. Last week, the Property Officer for the Diocese advised me that offers were accepted (*£200,000 and £165,000, which were 17K below the asking price and at a time when stamp duty rates have been reduced*).

This now allows us to think through, in line with government guidance, the risk assessments to re-open the existing presbytery building as a pastoral centre for Sacramental Preparation, Prayer Groups, Film afternoons and various other pastoral meetings, all of which are at the heart of parish life.

Yours sincerely,



Fr Simon Dray, Parish Priest