

## **Opinion and observations on St. Martha's church building expansion project.**

By Fr. George Suszko on April 5, 2025

### **I. Introduction:**

First, I need to inform you that my U.S. working Visa will expire in 1.5 year. I am told that I have a chance to receive the Green Card, which would give me a status of a permanent resident in U.S. which means that I may remain in St. Martha longer than 1.5 years. So, requested by the Diocese to move on with the project of expanding the St. Martha's church building I would like to present to you my opinion and observations on the subject. I am aware of a serious responsibility that I am undertaking, and I am asking you to take it as well and I ask God to assist us with his blessing. I think that we should consider the expansion of St. Martha's church building. I recommend that we look at Option A of what the HALL ARCHITECTS produced as SANCTUARY EXPANSION FEASIBILITY STUDY on the 21 March 2019. I think that the number of church attendants is already too large, which is reflected in the number of Masses we celebrate in St. Martha's parish and in using the parish hall as liturgical space for Masses. I don't think it was intended in 1979 when the hall was built. I understand that for the parish in Downtown, it is our mission to provide frequent Masses and Confessions, yet none of the parish in the Diocese of Venice has the same number of Masses as St. Martha in Sarasota. We seem to be patching the gaps and putting additional Masses when the need arises and yet we should be looking at the long-term strategic pastoral plan for our parish. We need to see other factors like the development of faith in our parish and more dignified treatment of parishioners and part-time parishioners as well as visitors and potential parishioners who may want to join us. We all need to express our opinions because if we agree to expand the church, we will need every single parishioner, part-time parishioner and visitor to help finance the project.

### **II. The background:**

1. **The Assessment Committee** called by Fr. Fausto Stampiglia in June 2021 produced, after the parish survey, the assessment paper advising Bishop Frank Dewane against the expansion of the church.

They analyzed increases and decreases and population movements in Sarasota City and in the County. The Assessment Committee promised to reassess the issue two years after a

change of pastor. That time has now passed, and we need to reassess the numbers of people in our parish who attend the church.

2. **Bishop Frank Dewane** called me for a meeting with the Chancellor,

Mr. Volodymyr Smeryk, and the Diocesan Director of Finances, Mr. Peter Portland, on December 16, 2024, in Venice and asked that we move on with the project of the church expansion. In obedience to our Bishop in my role as a pastor, which in Canon Law means that I am Bishop's pastoral assistant, I would like to obey what my bishop is requesting from me. I also respect the Diocesan Authority as an institution that has better knowledge than anybody else about the church buildings in the Diocese and wider perspective of the parish development as well as a prophetic role of leadership in our local church.

3. The Sarasota **population is constantly increasing**. Condominiums, hotels, private houses are being built everywhere, especially in the Downtown area. This means that we still have a stable flow of people into the City and County. Many tourists come here during the summertime; we are an open community but with limited logistics to welcome them.

4. Our neighboring parishes are building new churches to accommodate more parishioners. They see the need to expand their capacity. **St. Jude parish**, which borders with St. Martha's parish to the East, has begun their capital campaign to collect \$12m to build a new church. The old one is too small for the congregation. Are they building the new church only because of the growth of the Hispanic Community?

5. **Christ the King parish**, which borders St. Martha's parish to the south, has started the capital campaign to collect \$8m to build a new church for 440 people. The current church for 150 people will become a parish hall. Are they building the new church only because of the growth of the Extraordinary Form of Mass (Latin)?

6. **Our Lady of the Angels**. The Diocese has recently announced purchasing the land in Lakewood Ranch to start a new Parish Mission (St. Benedict), which in the future

will become a new parish. We don't have to do what others do, but shouldn't we ask the question, why are they building new churches?

7. **St. Martha primary school** has a waiting list of students who have applied to it. The Diocese is pressing the school to expand its capacity.
  
8. **Cardinal Mooney High Scholl** has started a capital campaign to collect \$23m to build a new building. The school is too small for the needs of the Catholic population in the County.

### **III. Arguments for expansion of St. Martha church building**

1. **We compromise the sanctity and dignity of the sacraments** in the parish hall, especially the Holy Mass. There is no kneeling for certain parts of Mass, we don't have pews with kneelers. Nobody would choose the hall for Funeral, Baptism, let alone Wedding or First Communion or Confirmation.
  
2. **We don't have a Tabernacle in the hall.** Currently we use a cupboard in the small sacristy to store the Blessed Sacrament. We constantly move around with the Blessed Sacrament between the church and the hall.
  
3. **We don't teach our children to show reverence to the Blessed Sacrament,** they don't learn to treat the church as a sacred place of prayer and devotion. Our children don't learn to kneel during Mass, or to kneel when they say private prayers. When we add the fact that they get the same in our Catholic Schools during School's Masses we will realize that unlike previous generations our children are not learning about a uniqueness and sanctity of the church as place of worship and the temple of God really present in it.
  
4. Some members of the School Board in St. Martha's Primary School expressed their negative opinion about the 9.00am Family/Children Mass in the hall and they

described it as: “**school being relegated**” from church to hall. They apparently regard the parish hall as not really church. They think that the school students should have their Mass in the church, which is impossible now because of the number of Mass attendants at both 9.00am Masses.

5. Problems with getting American Green Card by foreign Catholic Priests employed by the Diocese could affect the situation of the Polish Pallottines in Sarasota as it affects other priests employed by the Diocese and in consequence **reduce the number of priests** working in St. Martha’s parish.
6. There are **some tensions in our church porch/cry room** between families with young children and ushers trying to control the situations which become difficult in this small space where few other things are taking place at the same time.
7. In 2022 the architects employed by the Diocese prepared phases of development for St. Martha’s campus and one proposal was to build the new rectory on Goodrich Avenue, demolish the old rectory and expand the parish hall towards Adelia Road. Since that project collapsed and our old Rectory is being renovated, this means that our **parish hall building will not be expanded and will remain as it is**. We may decide to do the church expansion, move all Masses to the church and then redo the hall and turn it into the parish hall, which will be used exclusively for social purposes as it was meant.
8. Old confessional, which is in the porch has not been used for at least three years. **The porch is too small, noisy and doesn’t provide privacy needed for proper sacrament of reconciliation**. Only yesterday it was used during our 24 Hours Confessions when the confessions were moved for the night hours to the church and there was nothing else going on but only few people adoring the Blessed Sacrament.

#### **IV. Benefits of expanding the church:**

1. The church with over 1,000 sitting places will bring our parish community closer together and will be ready to host many more who would want to

come and join us in worship or join the parish. The parish will grow in number and in faith.

2. The church with over 1,000 seats will help us to stop our added Masses in the hall at 4.00pm, 9.00am and 10.30am and the Vietnamese Mass could be moved to the church.
3. Our 11 congregations (4pm, 4pm in hall, 5.30pm, 7.30am, 9.00am, 9.00am in hall, 10.30am, 10.30am in hall, 12.00pm, 12.00pm- Vietnamese, 5.30pm) from Masses, which we celebrate between September and April, which then become 8 congregations (from Masses, which we celebrate between March and December) could become 3 or 4 congregations plus the Vietnamese. We could have Masses at 7.30am, 9.00am, 10.30am, 12.00pm-Vietnamese and 5.30pm. This would allow us to take part in Mass with many more of our friends, family members and other parishioners. In fact, we could get to know other parishioners whom now we never meet.
4. We would be able to organize one First Holy Communion Mass for all our children from the parish Religious Education and from St. Martha Primary School together with St. Mary's Academy instead of 3 different celebrations at separate Masses.
5. We will be able to invite parishioners for our annual Confirmation celebration with Bishop, which at the moment is impossible.
6. We would be able to hold annual School opening Mass or other school liturgical events in our church.
7. With the number of priests shrinking a bigger church with fewer Masses would be easier to staff and run by for example three priests.
8. A bigger church will allow us to free the parish hall from liturgical use and to dedicate it for social activities, like dances, cheese and wine, parish

gatherings, conferences, children activities, retreats and many other events that we would love to have and we don't for the lack of space or for too much trouble with putting tables and chairs and then changing everything for Sunday Mass.

#### **V. Some dilemmas:**

1. Our church is beautiful, and we love it. In comparison to some other more modern and bigger Catholic churches in Sarasota, St. Martha's church has a traditional and churchy character. Our stain glass windows are works of art, and our sanctuary represents very appealing grand stonework. Our church is attractive for many couples who come from faraway places to get married here. The church organ is something special and even though it needs some special care now, it looks and sounds great. Many of us have even become used to seeing the organ placed right in front of the congregation, which is unusual. Yet, the character of St. Martha's church building needs to be kept.

2. And here is the first dilemma: If we decide to expand the church according to the proposed project, the organ will have to be moved. Most probably "pushed back" to the same or similar position in what would become new front of the church in the new added church part. We would need to check with professionals to see if the organ can be safely moved.

3. The granite stone/marble Sanctuary would need to be dismantled, moved and most probably remodeled. The Altar, Ambo, Baptismal Font and Rails will certainly be preserved to be used in the new sanctuary. Personally, I think that moving the Ambo and Baptismal Font would improve their pastoral use.

- At the moment the Ambo, even though it is placed in front of us in the church, which allows the word of God to be close to congregation, yet it covers the view of the Altar during Mass, Weddings and Funerals in such a way that some people sitting on the left-hand side of the church cannot see what is happening at the Altar.
  
- The Baptismal Font doesn't have much space around it, because it is fenced in and only provides enough space for a priest and parents, even the godparents struggle to see something of their godchild's Baptism. The rest of the families involved who are sitting in front pews facing the Sanctuary don't get the chance to see the child being baptized. After one or two Baptisms at

our main Baptismal Font, I decided to use “portable baptistry” made of a table from under the statue of Our Lady with the crystal bowl on top of it placed in the middle of the Sanctuary, in front of the Altar so that the Baptism is witnessed by everyone present in the church for that reason. I have been doing it for the last three years, I don’t use the main Baptismal Font, which looks great, but it does not serve its purpose.

- Here comes another problematic part of our Sanctuary, which can be improved when moved and remodeled in the new Sanctuary. To get to our Sanctuary we need to walk three steps up and down, and I think that those three steps in our Sanctuary are higher and bigger than the general standard steps. Many elderly priests, deacons, lectors, cantors, altar servers, sacristans, including Bishop and anybody else who needs to get there find them difficult to use.
  
- The Tabernacle is almost invisible in our church and the impression is that it is hidden in the alcove facing the altar. I think that this plays a big role in encouraging secularistic attitudes, irreverent and relaxed behavior, instead of prayerful and deep preparation for the Holy Mass.

4. We don’t have money for a big project like this. We have recently spent \$1.6m on the renovation work of the Rectory, which is slowly coming to an end. We have had all the roofs on our campus replaced with a new metal sheet roof which will cost us over \$800,000k. We would need to organize a capital campaign to finance the church expansion. But let’s remember that we have a piece of land on Goodrich Avenue which could be sold and the money used to create a good starting point in our eventual capital campaign.

5. Expanding the church would need to go with expanding the car parking space. Obviously, any parking space that we have now, and which would have been taken by the new part of the church building, would have to be compensated for by new parking spaces across Fruitville Road. The number of new seats in the church would also have determined the number of parking spaces required by the law.

6. I have a feeling that in our parish the arguments: “*let us do it for our children*” or “*let us do it for future generations*” are not so strong. In other parishes these are often the driving

arguments for building new churches or expanding them. Many of us are over sixty and about 30% of our parish are part-time parishioners, the so called “snowbirds” and their children are not here. Many of us may be thinking that we are happy with what we have, and we don’t want any change. Yet, the population of the city and the County is growing and who knows maybe our children will follow our footsteps and one day come to settle in Sarasota.

## **VI. Conclusion:**

1. We need to pray to God over this, we need to recognize what is God’s plan for our parish. The history of our parish shows that God Almighty looks after us through help of generous parishioners and donors, in a big part the Circus community did it in the past by performing many acts and arts of Circus shows and attractions to fundraise for our church. We need to pray to St. Martha, our patron Saint. I propose to add a prayer through her intercession to our Sunday Prayer of the Faithful, so we will be inspired by God to make the best decision for the future of our parish.
2. I wanted to present this opinion/observations paper to invite the parish to reassess the need of expansion of St. Martha church and to begin parish wide consultations on the subject. I am ready to answer questions and clarify points of my statement. I don’t think that we should have a discussion on “yes” or “no” for the project today.
3. I propose to meet again like this for the open parish assembly in 3 weeks on Saturday, April 26 so that many “*snowbirds*” will be still in Sarasota, and we will be able to hear from the Assessment Committee, Parish Finance Committee, Parish Council, Parish Business manager and any other groups or individuals. Please, prepare your statement on paper and distribute it before you present it before the Assembly and sign it. I then will ask the same Assessment Committee (if possible) to compile our opinions and produce recommendation to the pastor and bishop. This introductory part is to help us to see if we, as the parish, want to expand the church or not.
4. This consultation process needs to involve every single parishioner and our church attendants and visitors. We all need to express our opinions because if we agree to expand the church, we will need every single parishioner, part-time parishioner and



visitor to help finance the project. So, we need to scale it well. The Gospel teaches us to prepare well “*to build a house*” or “*to go to war against other king*” it calls for wisdom, balance “pros” and “cons” and make sure that we have enough resources, or we can find them to start the project like this.