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Clergy, faithful discuss future of seminary buildings, land

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On Friday, March 11, Bishop Samuel Aquila shared a proposal for the Cardinal Muench Seminary buildings and land at 100 35th Ave. N.E. in Fargo. He proposed that the diocese "offer for sale the seminary buildings and land to any interested religious or secular institution for use of their own choosing, provided this use is consistent with Catholic principles."

The proposal also notes that, "The sale would not occur for at least one year during which time the property will be vacated and the library relocated." Financial analysis is provided with the proposal, which is available in full at www.fargodiocese.org/review.

One year ago, on April 8, 2010, Bishop Aquila announced the diocese would discontinue its college seminary program at Cardinal Muench Seminary at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year (May 2011). In conjunction with this decision, it was announced that a review of the seminary properties and all Fargo, West Fargo and Horace parish and Catholic school properties would begin in June 2010. The goal of the ongoing review is to ensure better stewardship and more effective and efficient use of Catholic facilities in the growing metro area. The March 11 proposal was in line with the timeline related to the seminary portion of the review. A final decision will be announced in May.

In a letter that accompanied the proposal, Bishop Aquila said that Diocese of Fargo college-level seminarians (those in their first years of study) will study at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit beginning in the fall of 2011, a decision that was communicated earlier this year to priests. "The spiritual formation program at Sacred Heart is close to what we had at Cardinal Muench and I am confident that our seminarians will receive a strong foundation in the spiritual life there," Bishop Aquila wrote.

Proposed ideas

On Saturday, March 26, a meeting for clergy, religious and the laity was held at Sts. Anne & Joachim Catholic Church, Fargo, to gather input on the proposal. Several ideas for use of the seminary facility and property had already been submitted to the diocese through letters and the website comment form. They were included in the March 11 proposal and discussed at the meeting.

The proposal listed the following ideas for the use of Cardinal Muench Seminary, which have been considered yet do not appear to be financially feasible:

- Housing for retired priests — Diocesan priests were surveyed and limited interest was expressed.
- Conference/meeting facility.
- Catholic dormitory serving North Dakota State University.
- Assisted living center — it does not appear to be financially feasible for the diocese to renovate and operate the facility for this use; however, this may be a good option for a potential buyer.
- Retreat center — there is a desire to not compete with religious orders within the diocese, who currently offer retreat facilities at their convents.
- University of Mary satellite campus — a discussion was held, but U Mary already operates a very successful Fargo center.

- Education Center for Laity formation for parish ministries, functions, and works — this could require a number of personnel, but would have little revenue potential to make it self-sustaining.
- Convent — religious orders, rather than the diocese, operate convents, so this could be an option if a religious order is interested in purchasing the buildings and land.
- Independent Catholic Apostolate — because this refers to an apostolate that is independent of the diocese, this could be a possibility if the apostolate purchased the buildings and land.
- Maternity Home — there is a concern that this would compete with established maternity homes. This use precludes use for other purposes due to privacy and security concerns.

A financial analysis of using the facility as a combination retirement home for priests, a conference center and a dormitory was presented at the meeting. It indicated that, even if the facility did not provide food service, it would operate at a loss due to general operational costs and staffing. The analysis did not include renovations that would be needed for such use.

During the meeting, Msgr. Gregory Schlesselmann, rector of the seminary, told of the efforts made to recruit additional seminarians for Cardinal Muench Seminary prior to the April 2010 announcement that the program would be discontinued. Bishops and archbishops of over 25 dioceses and archdioceses, in addition to those who had sent seminarians to CMS in the past, were contacted regarding the possibility of their seminarians attending CMS. "We were not able to garnish sufficient, serious support that we could count on," he said. "Interest, yes, in some respects, but never to the level of real commitment."

Some, he said, expressed surprise that CMS was still open, since many of the college-level seminaries (those designed for only the first four years of study) in the United States have closed. Recruiting was complicated by the fact that several dioceses allow their college-level seminarians to decide where they want to study, Msgr. Schlesselmann said, and many of the men choose larger communities. St. John Vianney College Seminary in St. Paul, for example, is full, he said.

Msgr. Schlesselmann also noted that, following the apostolic visitations of seminaries in 2005, the Holy See indicated to U.S. bishops that consideration be given to reduction of the number of seminaries to ensure a sufficient pool of formators, those who work with formation and instruction of seminarians.

More ideas discussed

Msgr. Dennis Skonseng, who was a seminarian at CMS for four years, worked on and off at CMS for a total of 14 years, and is currently pastor of St. Catherine's Catholic Church in Valley City, said the seminary "would be a great spirituality center" to be used for retreats, classes and other purposes. Scott Hoselton, diocesan finance officer, said funds would be needed to subsidize its operation as a retreat center. He used the former Queen of Peace Retreat Center on north Broadway in Fargo as an example, noting that, even with its smaller size, it always operated at a loss. But, he added, "Is it out of the question? No. Bishop [Aquila] is open to everything at this point in time."

Hoselton also said that members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council discussed using CMS as a retreat center and expressed concern that it "would impact adversely," and could possibly lead to the eventual closure of, existing retreat centers operated by the Franciscan Sisters of Dillingen in Hankinson and the Sisters of Mary of the Presentation in Valley City. The council is comprised of representatives from the religious communities in the diocese, clergy and lay representatives from every deanery, and diocesan staff, and provides consultation

for Bishop Aquila.

One person at the March 26 meeting suggested closing but keeping CMS for a time, and questioned the cost of doing that. Hoselton said the costs for an employee to provide minimal maintenance, utilities, insurance and other expenses necessary to preserve the facility in an unused state could add up to \$150,000 per year.

Another person suggested moving the Diocesan Pastoral Center offices to the seminary and using the current Pastoral Center for something else, possibly an elementary school. Hoselton said Catholic Charities North Dakota, located at the Pastoral Center together with the diocesan offices, has grown in recent years and there has been discussion of using CMS for some of the CCND offices. However, CMS, which has dormitory style housing in part of the facility, would need significant renovations for this shift to occur.

Another suggestion was to use CMS as a homeless shelter. "It would be perfect for that. You could open a food kitchen. It's right in line with the teachings of our church," the person said. Hoselton said he had spoken with a representative of a group from Minnesota that works with the homeless, but, as with some other organizations that have discussed use of the facility, CMS is larger than what they are looking for.

Hoselton also said that about a half dozen developers have approached the diocese regarding possibly purchasing the CMS buildings and land.

"It just seems like a terrible loss," Father Duaine Cote, a retired priest who assists at Sts. Anne and Joachim Church, said of the proposed sale of CMS. As Vocations Director in the 1970s and early 1980s, Father Cote recruited many seminarians for CMS. He recommended studying whether there are donors available who would fund its operation as a retreat center. Hoselton noted that no donors have come forth since the announcement of discontinuation of the seminary program in April 2010, but said it could still happen.

Father Leo Stelten, who helped convert the old Sacred Heart convent at 1310 Broadway, damaged by a tornado in 1957, into the first Cardinal Muench Seminary, was present when the current facility was built, and taught at CMS for a total of 15 years. He expressed his emotional connection with CMS, saying "I was there when it was born and I'm here now when it's dying, and I'd rather not see it die."

The seminary library

Of primary concern to Father Stelten and several others is the seminary library, which Bishop Aquila, in the proposal, noted would be relocated.

Father Raymond Courtright asked how much space would be needed if the library was relocated to St. Anthony of Padua Church in Fargo. Father Andrew Jasinski said there are about 40,000 volumes in the library, including a rare book collection and archival items, and that he could provide the square footage estimate of space needed. Then, Father Courtright asked with a smile, "Does Father Stelten come with the books?" The question met with laughter of appreciation for Father Stelten's countless hours of library work and expertise.

The group also talked about dividing up the library contents, making a portion available to the public either in a university setting or in some other way. A library membership fee to help fund operation of the library was suggested. Moving the library to the Diocesan Pastoral Center was discussed, but it was noted that there is not sufficient space there.

The faithful are invited to provide other ideas, including financial analysis, in writing to Bishop Aquila at 5201 Bishops Blvd., Ste. A, Fargo, ND 58104-7605, or via the website comment form. A link to the form is found at www.fargodiocese.org/review. Email letters may be sent to Suzanne Nelson, Bishop Aquila's assistant, at suzanne.nelson@fargodiocese.org. Ideas should be submitted by April 15. Those interested in the possibility of purchasing the CMS buildings and land should contact Scott Hoselton at (701) 356-7930.