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Diocese's removal of stained glass at issue



Church officials removed the stained glass windows from the former Holy Name of Jesus Church in Worcester before the building was sold Tuesday. (T&G Staff Photos / RICK CINCLAIR)

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Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, stands near the former Holy Name church in Worcester.

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-- RAYMOND L. DELISLE,, DIOCESAN VICE CHANCELLOR FOR OPERATIONS

WORCESTER — The Worcester Historical Commission has asked the city’s Law Department to investigate whether the Diocese of Worcester violated a municipal ordinance that protects landmarks after church officials removed the stained glass windows from the former Holy Name of Jesus Church on Illinois Street.

The action was taken after Preservation Worcester officials complained that diocesan officials should have sought a waiver from the board of the so-called demolition delay ordinance before removing the windows.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, told the Telegram & Gazette that the windows were “architecturally significant” to the historical church and maintained that they fell under the purview of the 13-year-old ordinance.

Meanwhile, chancery officials said that the windows are sacred objects and the diocese had the right to remove them for possible installation at another Roman Catholic church.

“These windows are religious objects and canon law dictates that we treat them as sacred items,” said Raymond L. Delisle, diocesan vice chancellor for operations.

Holy Name church was one of five parishes closed by Bishop Robert J. McManus last summer. The red brick church, which sits opposite University Park in Worcester’s Main South neighborhood, was sold for \$1 million earlier this year to Belmont A.M.E. Zion Church, which had been looking for a new home since 2006.

Holy Name church, which at one time boasted one of the largest Franco-American congregations in New England, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

It also is listed on the Massachusetts Cultural Resources Information System, which is managed by the state Historical Commission. Properties listed with the system are afforded protections.

City officials said the demolition delay ordinance was established largely to protect structures recognized as historically significant by state and federal authorities.

Worcester Historical Commission Chairman Peter B. Schneider added that any substantive work or alterations to the exterior of buildings deemed historic must be approved by his panel.

He said the commission believes the stained glass windows are included within the protections of the ordinance and referred the matter to city lawyers for further review.

Additionally, the board alerted the Code Department about the situation, in the event code regulations were violated.

Ms. Packard said that, shortly after learning of the church closings, she sent a letter to Bishop McManus warning him about the ordinance. She also met with Msgr. Thomas J. Sullivan, diocesan chancellor and director of fiscal affairs, last summer and earlier this month about the situation.

Mr. Delisle said the windows were removed for possible sale to another church.

He noted, for example, that the diocese had removed the windows from the 118 year-old St. Mary’s Church in Spencer before that building was demolished several months ago because of safety concerns.

Those windows were later sold to a Catholic church in Louisiana.

"There are companies that specialize in the removal and re-installation of stained glass windows," Mr. Delisle said.

He said many religious items were removed from the five churches closed in Worcester.

Proceeds from the sale of those items, he said, would benefit the parish that assumed a closed church's assets and liabilities. In the case of Holy Name, the proceeds would be turned over to Holy Family Church on Hamilton Street.

Of the five closed churches, windows were removed from two — Holy Name and Ascension Church on Vernon Hill.

City officials said there's no issue about the removal of windows from Ascension because that church, as well as St. Margaret Mary Church, which also was closed, are not considered historically significant by state or federal authorities.

However, officials said St. Casimir's Church on Providence Street and Notre Dame des Canadiens downtown, the two other closed parishes, are on the state Historical Commission's survey of historic properties.

"It's believed that other churches will be closed over the coming years and we want church officials to know that there is a process to be followed, if the buildings are deemed historically significant," Ms. Packard said. "The church is not above the law."

Officials said the ordinance imposes an automatic one year delay on the "demolition" of historic structures. PW officials argue that the ordinance also covers significant work or alterations to the exterior of such structures.

The delay takes effect when the property owner applies for a demolition permit. PW officials said the diocese should have filed an application, given the scope of work involved.

The delay is intended to allow interested parties to formulate a preservation plan for the building. The commission can, and has, waived the delay, if a particular building poses public safety concerns, or if the delay would pose a financial hardship on the property owner.

Virginia C. Raguin, a professor of art at the College of the Holy Cross, said the windows should not have been removed.

"They are extremely important," she explained. "They are an integral part of the church's historical and architectural fabric."

Besides, she said it makes no sense economically to remove the windows since re-installation costs total about a third of the price of new windows.

Ms. Raguin added that it's difficult to remove the windows without cracking them. She noted a window's leading, which holds the stained glass pieces together, would have to be replaced.

"Windows are very difficult to recycle," she noted.

Ms. Raguin added that the "sacredness" of the windows should not be an issue because closed churches are "deconsecrated" when they are shut down.

Ms. Raguin said stained glass windows became popular around the Middle Ages in northern Europe, particularly England. Prior to that time, churches featured wood shutters that helped keep heat in and the cold out.

She said most stained glass windows feature significant events in Christ's life, the Virgin Mary, and figures that are prominent in the Bible. Churches named after saints often feature their patrons on some windows.

Ms. Raguin said stained glass windows are popular with Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians and some other Christian denominations. Progressive Jewish groups, which think highly of art, also incorporate stained glass windows in their temples. Some Muslims use stained glass windows that feature patterns that complement the décor of mosques and other places of worship, Ms. Raguin said.

She said all stained glass windows are hand-crafted and several artisans are usually involved in their production.

"Generally, there are no artists specifically associated with stained glass windows because there are so many people involved in the work," she said.

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