

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
Monday, April 16, 2018

Sale of sacred windows raising questions about Worcester Diocese's stewardship



By [Mark Sullivan](#)
Telegram & Gazette Staff

Posted Apr 15, 2018 at 7:26 PM Updated Apr 16, 2018 at 1:36 PM

WORCESTER - With the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church soon to be reduced to rubble, sacred heirlooms of the one-time Mother Church of the city's French Canadian Catholics live on.

But the Worcester Catholic Diocese won't say where. It's a secret.

And now parishioners of the shuttered Our Lady of Mount Carmel church wonder if sacred stained glass windows from their cherished home will suffer the same unknown fate.

The diocese and its sales agent refuse to identify buyers of stained-glass windows for reasons of confidentiality. Currently, antique stained-glass windows from Notre Dame are being offered for

sale on the internet for \$15,000 and up, the Telegram & Gazette has reported and the Diocese and its sales agent have confirmed.

More than half the windows from the church already have been sold, according to Adrian Hamers Inc., a Larchmont, New York, religious-goods dealer retained by the diocese to transfer the Notre Dame windows. The dealer and the diocese say the windows have been sold to other Catholic churches.

The heirlooms from Notre Dame are not the only stained-glass windows from the diocese for sale on the internet. Windows from St. Bernard's Church in Fitchburg, closed in 2010, are listed on eBay for \$20,000 and more.

At Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is for sale and faces potential demolition, parishioners are raising questions about the diocese's stewardship of sacred property entrusted to its care.

"It's a shame and a disgrace," said Carmelita Bello, vice-president of the Mount Carmel Preservation Society, said of the sale of sacred objects. The society has appealed to the Vatican in its campaign to save the landmark Italian-American church on Mulberry Street.

The Mount Carmel Preservation Society's president Mauro DePasquale, said: "How does our church leadership and their lack of responsible stewardship make us feel? Some have told me they feel oppressed, brokenhearted, angry, their faith even shaken.

"To me this matter for both (Notre Dame and Mount Carmel) churches is not only about possibly losing architecturally and historically significant buildings and the irreplaceable artwork inside them including the stained-glass windows, it's much more," Mr. DePasquale said. "It's demolishing our community's sacred space."

The secrecy around the sale of the windows contrasts with the approach other prominent Catholic dioceses have taken to the relocation of stained glass from closed churches.

Philadelphia, Boston and New Orleans archdioceses not only are open about where surplus church windows go, they have publicized their successful reuse.

The Boston Archdiocese has an [extensive website](#) cataloging windows from closed parishes available for placement in new church homes. Windows have been placed in a needy parish in Brownsville, Texas, and in the new Seaport Shrine in Boston, according to the Archdiocese.

Not so with Worcester. When it comes to stained glass, the local diocese has been less than transparent.

"Personally, I find selling sacred items such as stained-glass windows on eBay disrespectful to those for whom they have special meaning," said Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester.

“By far, the most heart-wrenching part of my job is working with church members whose churches are being demolished,” Ms. Packard said. “Because parishioners fund and sometimes dedicate stained-glass windows, I believe they should be consulted about the future of the windows, and dedicated windows should be offered to the party that purchased them.”

Stained-glass windows depicting saints and religious figures were to be removed when Notre Dame was sold by the diocese to the developers of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project in 2010. The diocese stressed the windows, under Church law, only could be transferred to other Catholic churches for religious use, not sold to individuals.

The T&G in late March asked the diocese to disclose the whereabouts of three Notre Dame windows that have been sold, so the relocation to other Catholic churches, as required under Church law, could be independently verified. The diocese declined.

“We are not releasing where these windows were sold after the fact given that public disclosure of the buyer of the windows was not part of the contracted sale through Hamers,” Raymond Delisle, chancellor and communications director for the Diocese, replied then via email.

Disclosing buyers is “strictly against policy,” said Whittier Peirce, co-owner of religious-goods dealer Adrian Hamers Inc.

“We respectfully honor the requests of the buyers to remain anonymous,” said Mr. Peirce, who does business under the name Whittier Hamers, which he uses for professional reasons to note his family ties to the firm’s namesake founder, his grandfather.

Said diocesan spokesman Mr. Delisle: “They do not publicly disclose the names of the churches which purchase windows and neither can we. There can be high tension from some individuals in some instances regarding the closing of a particular church and the need to move these items to another location for continued use. The receiving church cannot become involved in these controversies, whether they are across town or across the country.”

That has not been the experience of Neil Cippon, a stained-glass artist with Beyer Studio, in Philadelphia. The Beyer Studio administers the Sacred Windows Rescue Project, a digital clearinghouse for surplus church windows that promotes their relocation worldwide. Asked if he has found that parishes receiving windows wish to remain anonymous, Mr. Cippon said: “Just the opposite. It’s a case of pride. A lot of churches are happy to be reusing old windows.”

The Boston Archdiocese, for example, showcases repurposed windows in the new [Our Lady of Good Voyage Shrine](#) in Boston’s Seaport District.

The archdiocesan newspaper The Pilot reports: “The stained glass windows that line the right side of the chapel are from Holy Trinity Church in the South End...To the left of the chapel, the stained glass windows originally came from Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Chelsea. The center of the rose window above the choir loft comes from St. Augustine Church in South Boston.” Windows in the shrine’s sanctuary came from St. Catherine of Siena Church in Charlestown, according to the Archdiocese.

“As much as possible, we tried to keep all the names of those who donated these magnificent windows,” the Archdiocese’s director of divine worship, Rev. Jonathan Gaspar, tells The Pilot. “That way we could honor their memory in their new home.”

The [Sacred Window Rescue Project](#) website lists more than two dozen Catholic parishes and institutions that have incorporated historic windows from closed churches through the program. Beneficiaries range from St. Margaret of Scotland Parish in Foley, Ala., to the new cathedral in Raleigh, N.C., according to Beyer Studio. The [Holy Name of Jesus Cathedral](#) in Raleigh has incorporated 87-year-old stained-glass windows from the closed Ascension of Our Lord Church in Philadelphia.

“In the 20-plus years we have been relocating windows, I have never encountered a desire for anonymity,” Joseph Beyer, president of Beyer Studio, said in an email. “Rescuing sacred art is something to be proud of. Families who donated the windows in the original settings are sometimes provided with the painted glass dedication inscriptions that announced the gift in the window, but the transfer is usually celebrated and trumpeted.

“There is simply no need for anonymity and the lack of transparency leaves a cloud over the entire process of change,” Mr. Beyer said.

The Worcester Diocese has no written contract with Hamers beyond a longstanding relationship with the firm, according to Mr. Delisle.

This lack of a contract is “beyond disturbing,” said Brody Hale, a church preservation activist and consultant to the Mount Carmel Preservation Society. “Safeguarding sacred goods is one of the most important tasks their owner is charged with. By not signing a contract with the entity that is handling the disposal of its stained glass, the Diocese of Worcester is ... at the very least displaying an attitude of extreme carelessness.”

As of last fall, nothing in the Hamers eBay listings stated that only Catholic churches could acquire the windows. Language noting the church-sale-only restriction for the Notre Dame windows was added to the listings after the Telegram & Gazette inquired into the sales in November. But the caveat still is not noted at listings at the dealer’s website [classicalchurchgoods.com](#).

“We’ve been doing this a long time,” Mr. Peirce said at the time. “Prior to a sale of any stained-glass window, we would thoroughly screen or make sure we’re familiar with who it is who’s purchasing them. It’s never them just buying a window sight unseen.”

In Fitchburg, longtime St. Bernard’s parishioners last week were shown several images of stained glass listed for sale on eBay by Hamers and readily identified the windows as coming from their former Catholic church, Fitchburg’s oldest when it was closed by the Worcester Diocese in 2010.

“Everyone said, ‘Oh, yes, absolutely,’” said Susan Navarre, executive director of the Fitchburg Historical Society, who shared the images with several society volunteers who attended the old St. Bernard’s.

A “Fishers of Men” window, with its donor panel noting it had been given in memory of James and Anna Daffy, from an old Fitchburg family, could be recognized down to the institutional pink paint color of the wall behind, Ms. Navarre said. The asking price on eBay is \$22,500. Nothing in the listing restricts the sale to other Catholic churches.

“Ecclesiastical stained glass carries important kinds of historical meaning: the Biblical stories themselves, the church congregation where they were housed, the architecture that they beautified, as well as the memory of the original donors,” Ms. Navarre said.

“It seems that the best possible new home is one in which all of those layers of significance are honored. A church is probably best; but, failing that, purchase by a museum helps assure that they will be safe for the future, because they are protected by the museum’s professional ethics.

“A private sale to private collectors cuts the windows off from their original meaning and history, and makes their future more uncertain,” she said. “I fervently hope that the windows will stay safe and the memory of their history in Fitchburg will be preserved.”