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Selling Dorothy Day's former New York parish to make way for luxury apartments would be a devastating blow to residents and former parishioners in a neighborhood threatened by gentrification, an American researcher said.

Speaking to Catholic News Service Nov. 29, Rebecca Amato, a historian and professor at New York University, said that although the now-decommissioned Church of the Nativity in the Lower East Side no longer serves the spiritual needs of the community, it has the potential of serving the material needs of the neighborhood.

Amato, who is also associate director of NYU's Urban Democracy Lab, which focuses on urban renewal in areas affected by gentrification, said former parishioners proposed to purchase the decommissioned church for $18 million to develop low-income, senior and homeless family housing.

The alternative plan is to sell the property for a reported $50 million and build a luxury residential development, which Amato said would be a "sordid use" of a once-sacred edifice.

Although not all of the residents in the area were parishioners, decommissioned churches like the Church of the Nativity continue to be an integral part of "the fabric of a neighborhood," Amato said.

"Those are the kind of things that are destroyed by global investment firms, but they shouldn't be destroyed by the archdiocese; they shouldn't be behaving the same way," Amato said.

In a Nov. 30 email to CNS, Joseph Zwilling, communications director for the New York Archdiocese, acknowledged that several proposals for the site were reviewed, including the proposal submitted by the church's former parishioners.

Nevertheless, he said, "the parish needs to receive fair market value for the property so that the parish and the archdiocese can continue to meet the pastoral, charitable, educational -- and housing -- needs of the people we serve."

Zwilling also explained that the proposed sale of the property "is by and for the parish, not the archdiocese."

"Our offices are assisting the parish, as we do for all parishes, since we do not expect our pastors to be experts in real estate transactions," Zwilling told CNS.

He also said that proceeds from the sale of the Church of the Nativity, which was merged in 2015 with a neighboring parish -- Most Holy Redeemer -- would not go to the archdiocese, but the parish.

Founded in 1842, the Church of the Nativity served the area's growing immigrant population and was once the parish of Dorothy Day who, along with Peter Maurin, founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933.

Day's funeral was held in the Church of the Nativity in 1980 and her sainthood cause has been championed by the Archdiocese of New York and its archbishop, Cardinal Timothy Dolan.

Amato was among the researchers who submitted posters or papers on completed studies or proposed projects dealing with the revitalization or repurposing of deconsecrated or underutilized places of worship.

The Pontifical Council for Culture, together with Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and the Italian bishops' conference, sponsored a conference titled

"Doesn't God Dwell Here Anymore? Decommissioning Places of Worship and Integrated Management of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage" Nov. 29-30 in Rome.

The goal of the international conference was to help dioceses work with their local communities in finding appropriate uses for decommissioned churches.

In a message to conference participants, Pope Francis highlighted the importance not only of protecting the sacredness of decommissioned churches, but also of ensuring that their subsequent use will continue to serve those in need.

The pope said that while the church has long affirmed "the duty to protect and preserve the goods of the church and in particular the cultural goods," those goods do not have an absolute value.

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When necessary, he said, "they must serve the greater good of the human being and especially the poor."

Zwilling told CNS that the Archdiocese of New York has an ongoing commitment to provide low-income housing and not only manages "nearly 2,300 units of affordable housing in New York City," but is also in the process of developing more.

"Mayor [Bill] de Blasio, as have former mayors, has said that the Catholic Church does more to provide affordable housing in New York City than any other faith community, religious, or charitable organization," Zwilling said.

However, Amato said the Catholic Church should still consider establishing land trusts to ensure that decommissioned churches are used in a way that respects the once-sacred use of the property and create "a social contract, a community contract, a set of guidelines to control what happens to the property on that land."

She also said she hopes the issues regarding the use of deconsecrated churches discussed at the Vatican-sponsored conference will influence the proposed sale of the Church of the Nativity.

The proposal to convert the parish into low-income housing would greatly benefit the residents near the church, Amato said. Predominantly made up of Catholics of Puerto Rican descent, residents find themselves not only "displaced by housing

issues, evictions, rising land costs but now they're being displaced by their own Catholic Church, by the archdiocese."

"It's incredibly ironic. More so because Dorothy Day -- who Pope Francis wants to canonize, who even Cardinal Dolan said he loves Dorothy Day -- was an advocate for the poor and the vulnerable and founded the Catholic Worker Movement in that neighborhood and worshipped at this church," Amato said.

"So, the idea of selling this property -- that is so associated with the Catholic Worker [Movement] and advocacy for the poor -- for $50 million is astounding on so many levels."