News



Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne gives the homily as he concelebrates Mass at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome Feb. 7, 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

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Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne will be moving from a parish rectory into a newly purchased $2.4 million home in an upscale waterfront neighborhood. Archdiocesan officials say the relocation is necessary to better accommodate guests but the decision has also garnered criticism.

"The move is breaking a promise that the archbishop made to us in a pretty major way," said Tim Law, a Seattle Catholic and attorney who is a member of Heal Our Church, a Washington-based alliance calling for a lay-led review of the Seattle Archdiocese's private records on clergy abuse.

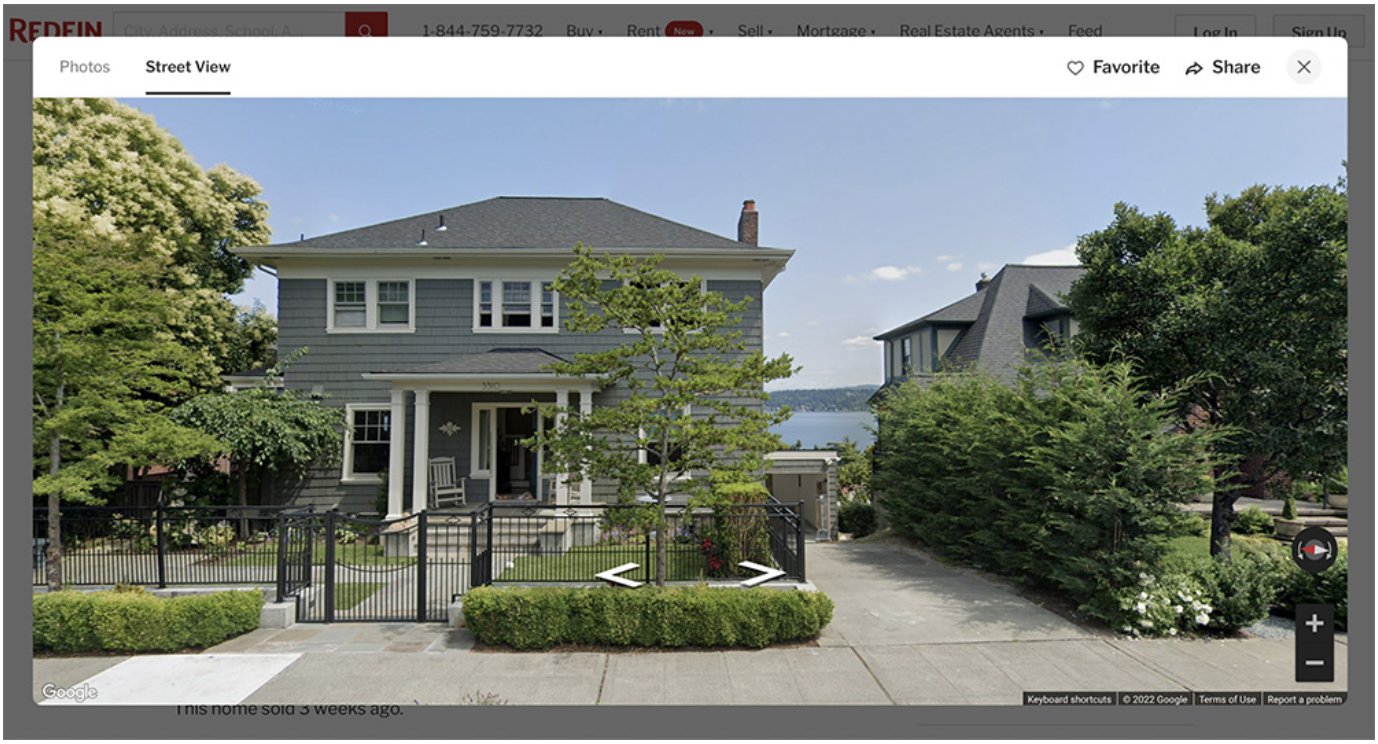
In 2019, on Etienne's first day as head of the archdiocese, he told priests and deacons in a letter he would forgo the traditional archbishops' residence — a 9,000-square-foot mansion named the Connolly House — and "live a more simplified life."

"While the Connolly House has been home to the archbishops since 1920, it will not be home for me," wrote Etienne.

He told Northwest Catholic, a news magazine and website for the Seattle Archdiocese: "I am a pastor, not a prince, and I want to live in a manner that's more reflective of how my people live."

Law noted the apparent contradiction. "His very first message to people is he shouldn't be living any higher than most of those he serves," said Law. "Then the archdiocese bought a house in one of the best neighborhoods in Seattle."

A Nov. 17 story in Northwest Catholic refers to the new home, to be called Bethany House, as both a residence and a hospitality center.



A street view of Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne's new residence, to be called Bethany House, is seen in its listing on the real estate website Redfin. (NCR screenshot)

"Relationships are important and having a place to continue to build relationships is an important part of the ministry of the archbishop," said Helen McClenahan, spokesperson for the archdiocese.

The Heal Our Church group was the first to share news of the purchase after learning about it from a member of the clergy who had attended a recent priests' meeting, where Etienne made the announcement, according to Law.

The shift from the rectory, which is adjacent to St. Peter Church in Seattle, to a 3,460-square-foot residence — featuring quartzite countertops, a clawfoot tub and "artisan stained glass," according to the Redfin listing — does not align with the archbishop's powerful first promise, said Terry Carroll, a retired Washington judge and member of Heal Our Church.

Law acknowledged that housing costs in Seattle are steep but that the five-bedroom residence is far outside the price range of most people's homes in the archdiocese.

The house is in the Mount Baker area of south Seattle, where, according to the real estate website Redfin, the average sale price for a home was $1.39 million last month, up 26.5% from last year. The average sale price of a home in Seattle overall was $843,000 last month, or a little more than one-third of the $2.4 million new house.

There would not be the same kind of shock over the decision, said Law, if Etienne "hadn't clearly asserted that he didn't want to be living differently than a majority of people in the archdiocese and that the money from the sale of Connolly House could go to fund ministries that really matter, such as caring for the poor."



An aerial view of Seattle's Mount Baker neighborhood, where Archbishop Paul Etienne's new residence is located (Wikimedia Commons/Dicklyon)

The archbishop in 2019 said Connolly House was real estate that, "if we divest of it, can help us advance the ministries of the church."

He said then he was in the process of "exploring options on church properties" and, at some point after, moved into the rectory at St. Peter Church.

Earlier this year, several archdiocesan properties, including Connolly House and chancery offices, were sold to a developer to create a carbon-neutral community in Seattle's First Hill district. The former bishops' residence sold for $13.5 million, according to the Nov. 17 story in Northwest Catholic. A portion of the proceeds were used to buy the new home.

McClenahan said even with the purchase of the house, there is more than $10 million from the sale for other ministries. She added that Bethany House is much smaller than Connolly House and has significantly lower maintenance costs.

The Nov. 11 post on the Heal Our Church website announcing the purchase said the group calls upon the archbishop "to cancel his moving to the house, sell the property and use the money to support parishes and social services just as he promised."

The Northwest Catholic article about the sale and purchase ran six days later. In the piece, Etienne is quoted saying that in the rectory he's "unable to offer proper accommodations for visiting bishops and priests, nor am I able to entertain guests and host meetings given its size and layout."

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But Carroll said there are several other suitable locations for the archbishop to host priests and visitors, including a recently renovated retreat and faith center overlooking Puget Sound.

"It's a wonderful retreat facility," said Carroll. "The idea that somehow there's a need for that house is duplicitous."

McClenahan told NCR the goal was to find a location where the archbishop could host events and guests, which is "a key part of his ministry as the archbishop," and that was near the cathedral. St. James Cathedral is about 4 miles north of the new residence.

According to McClenahan, the move was supported by several consultative bodies, among them the archdiocesan finance and pastoral councils and College of

Consultors, which includes priests. The groups "agreed this price point was reasonable given Seattle’s very competitive housing market," she said.

Seattle Catholic Robert Fontana, who has worked to expose the mishandling of abuse in the Diocese of Yakima, Washington, and who runs a Catholic nonprofit, said he understands the decision.

"I would prefer that the archbishop live in a parish in a poor neighborhood; it would change his worldview," Fontana said. "But I know that might feel unsafe, and he has a lot of people that come to see him and needs a bigger space. That's a good argument and I respect it."

Carroll views it differently. "When someone says they model themselves after Pope Francis," he said, "and makes the promise he did and then engages in this kind of extravagance, it is troubling."

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