

City seeks tax on shuttered Catholic churches

Meghan Rubado Religion News Service | Feb. 23, 2010

SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- The doors of St. Peter Catholic Church are chained and padlocked. The sign out front reads "for sale."

St. Peter and four other churches were recently closed by the Diocese of Syracuse to save money. Now the tax man wants his share.

City Assessor John Gamage put St. Peter and two other closed Catholic churches, St. Andrew the Apostle and St. Stephen, on the tax roll for the first time this year.

Since the churches are no longer being used as houses of worship, they are taxable, the assessor said.

Combined with two former city parochial schools also denied exempt status, the tax bill for Catholic parishioners could be \$89,175 based on tentative assessment figures and current tax rates.

This is the first time Gamage has denied exemptions to closed Catholic churches, but he said the city is not trying to start a holy war. Gamage, a Catholic himself, said the recent closures forced his office to include them in a regular review to ensure that tax-exempt buildings are being used for tax-exempt activities.

Making sure property owners pay their share is especially important in Syracuse, where less than half of the city's property value is taxed, which leaves the remaining owners responsible for all of the city's tax revenue.

That puts a huge burden on city homeowners, said William Anderson, a member of the city's Board of Assessment Review, which has the final say on exemption appeals.

"We're representatives of the small property owners," Anderson said. "They're the ones paying all the taxes, and they're the ones who don't really have a voice in this."

A nonprofit or religious organization isn't automatically exempt from taxes on any property it owns, Gamage said. To be exempt, the property has to be used for a religious, educational or other tax-exempt purpose. "It's not just about ownership," Gamage said.

All Catholic churches in the Syracuse diocese are individually incorporated, but Bishop Robert J. Cunningham is the president of all of those corporations, said diocese spokeswoman Danielle Cummings.

Robert Ventre, a lawyer representing St. Peter's, which was merged into a new parish in 2008, conceded the closed church is used infrequently. But it is still a church because it has relics from saints installed in the altar, said Ventre. That means Mass can be held there, and that the church isn't officially closed yet, Ventre said.

St. Peter Church is for sale and may have an offer coming in soon from another religious organization, Ventre said. The offer is for \$321,000.

[Meghan Rubado writes for *The Post-Standard* in Syracuse, N.Y.]

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