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\$34 million loss was a theft from the poor

by NCR Editorial Staff

The John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., a colossal and vapid manifestation of episcopal arrogance, will take on a new identity and purpose thanks to the recent purchase by the Knights of Columbus, who plan to turn it into a shrine to the late pope.

Exactly how the Knights will manage to fund the ongoing operations of a facility that has been a financial nightmare during its 10-year existence has yet to be announced. But the Knights have enormous resources from the insurance it sells to its 1.8 million members. We trust that the organization's members have means of letting the leadership know if it doesn't like what it's doing with their money.

Unfortunately, such is not the case for Catholics in the Detroit archdiocese who, when the deal is finalized, will be left with a loss of \$34 million.

They had no say in the matter when their former archbishop, Cardinal Adam Maida, decided to commit to loans and loan guarantees to a personal project for which he could not raise sufficient funds. He only managed to raise \$67 million, \$8 million short of the final \$75 million construction costs. That amount was far short of the funds needed to endow the place to assure its ongoing operation.

So Maida simply dipped into diocesan coffers, and also borrowed from the Allied Irish Bank \$23 million for which the archdiocese is responsible, to keep afloat a losing papal attraction more than 500 miles from his own archdiocese. John Paul personally selected Washington as the site when originally approached by Maida about the idea for a cultural center.

Some have tried to soften the understandable outrage over Maida's use of church funds for his personal ambition by saying that the initial investment was made in better times, prior to the global economic crisis and when the archdiocese's other investments were doing well.

The reality, however, is that while the Detroit metro area includes rather affluent suburbs, the city of Detroit has for a long time been one of the poorest U.S. cities by many measures. Since 2000, the archdiocese has closed more than three dozen schools, and more than 60 parishes have been either closed or merged.

Let's just say \$34 million would have gone a long way toward aiding the lives of the poor.

This, indeed, was a theft from the poor, a crime made more egregious by the fact that Maida felt free to use the people's money to his own ends without consulting anyone. The episode represents the worst side of the hierarchical culture that remains above accountability. This was the prince serving the image of his king, no questions please. And when the boondoggle was finally uncovered and the natural questions posed, the only answer forthcoming was: "We just don't talk about our investments."

It is heartening to learn that Archbishop Allen Vigneron, upon taking charge in 2009, immediately went about a thorough review of finances and reform of structures that should lead to much wider consultation and transparency about financial matters in the future.

Perhaps Detroit's loss will serve for a while as warning to other princes in the hierarchy that it is time to see service to the church as something other than sitting atop tiny kingdoms in which whatever the bishop says or wants to do becomes the law of the day. It would be far more encouraging were we to begin hearing voices speaking -- in light of the depressing run of sexual and financial scandals that Catholics have lived through as a result of bishops' poor decisions -- of the need for deep reform of the clerical/hierarchical culture.

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