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The Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, etc.

Richard McBrien | Sep. 6, 2011 Essays in Theology

Cardinal Adam Maida, who retired as archbishop of Detroit in 2009, first proposed the idea of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center to the pope when he (Maida) was still bishop of Green Bay, Wis. (1984-90). It may or may not have influenced the pope to appoint Maida to Detroit. More than four years later he was named a cardinal.

The center was subsequently erected in Washington, D.C., at a cost of $75 million. It was expected to more than pay for itself as a tourist attraction and a think tank. That never happened, as some predicted at the time.

The center opened in March 2001 and has just been sold to the Knights of Columbus for $22.7 million. That's a lot of money, of course, but it represents a $34 million loss for the Detroit archdiocese.

The archdiocese bore most of the original cost but also loaned the center more than $54 million under an arrangement worked out by the former Detroit archbishop, Maida. (I am relying here on the news story by Tom Roberts in the August 19 issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, "Knights buy John Paul II Cultural Center.")

Within five years of its opening, it was $36 million in debt to the Detroit archdiocese because of the loans. The amount rose to more than $54 million today, a portion of which included an average of $65,000 per month for upkeep, which the archdiocese continued to pay even while it marketed the center for sale during the past 18 months.

Unfortunately, Maida made the loans without consultation with the priests or laity of the archdiocese. It was only after the *NCR* reported on the debt in a February 2006 story that he acknowledged the financial scope of the loans in a letter to the archdiocese. Maida's successor, Allen Vigneron, has been left to pick up the pieces.

The Knights of Columbus intends to establish the building as a shrine to the late pope. But it will labor under the same liabilities as the original project.

The 100,000 square-foot center is located on 12 acres next to The Catholic University of America. However, the location is out-of-the-way and is not convenient to public transportation, unlike the many museums elsewhere in the city.

In any case, no diocese, much less one in which there is so much poverty in its central city, should have been exposed to so much financial risk.

But the wish to honor Pope John Paul II was intense at the time, not least because of ethnic considerations. The pope was a native of Poland, and Maida is of Polish-American extraction.

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The news story in the same issue of the *NCR* reminds us that too many U.S. bishops are still obsessed with

sexual and marriage issues while not emphasizing enough issues of social justice, such as the recent assault on the rights of collective bargaining in some U.S. states, like Wisconsin and Ohio.

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore sent a private letter to Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley to protest the governor's support of legislation legalizing same-sex marriages in the state.

O'Brien referred to himself and his fellow bishops as "advocates for the truths we are compelled to uphold."

In response to the archbishop, the governor wrote that he and the archbishop agree on many of the moral issues facing both sides of the secular-sacred divide.

O'Malley acknowledged the archbishop's right "to define, to preach about, and to administer the sacraments of the Roman Catholic church. But on the public issue of granting equal civil marital rights to same-sex couples, you and I disagree."

O'Malley noted that he was "sworn to uphold the law without partiality or prejudice." He underscored his conviction that "discriminating against individuals based on their sexual orientation in the context of civil marital rights is unjust. I have also concluded," the governor continued, "that treating the children of families headed by same-sex couples with lesser protection under the law than the children of families headed by heterosexual parents is also unjust."

The archbishop insisted that "Maryland is not New York," where, with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's vigorous support, the state senate passed legislation that legalized same-sex marriage. O'Brien urged O'Malley not to be influenced by that development.

Unlike his counterpart in Baltimore, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York showed much pastoral wisdom in his dealings with Cuomo, and Cuomo, in turn, exercised much political prudence in his dealings with Dolan.

Both Cuomo and O'Malley ably defended justice and fairness in marriage and family life.

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