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20 December 2022

Mary O'Neil  
Department of Permitting & Inspections  
City of Burlington

Dear Ms. O'Neil,

I am writing to urge caution considering the demolition permit for the former Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, located at 20 Pine Street, which at this stage should mean denying the request for alternative compliance.

I am an architectural historian whose primary scholarly expertise is in modern religious architecture and sacred space. I understand and support the general arguments against demolition in this case: the historic significance of the building and its landscape, the inherent sustainability of adaptive reuse strategies, and the value of the "breathing space" this site provides in the midst of a downtown becoming more dense with recent and ongoing development.

But I write specifically because I take just as seriously the debates over the many things — actions, objects, texts, sites, buildings, and places — that humans call sacred. It is in light of these matters that I urge caution and advocate denial of the request before you.

Monsignor Peter Routhier emphasizes the preference for demolition as the means for completing the process of deconsecration (letter to Scott Gustin, 27 October 2022; letter to Preservation Burlington, 28 October 2022). But he also acknowledges that it is not the only method recognized by Roman Catholic canon law. Indeed, it could be effected simply by decree of the bishop of the diocese, though congregations often desire something more as an aid in coping with the loss and transition typically involved in deconsecration. Nevertheless, the historical and contemporary practice of deconsecration is complicated, and no single method is standard (see, e.g., Kim de Wildt, "Ritual Void or Ritual Muddle? Deconsecration Rites of Roman Catholic Church Buildings," *Religions* 2020, 11, 517; doi:10.3390/rel11100517).

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I will not argue here that the congregation's preference is somehow incorrect. I honor their concerns. I will be so bold as to suggest, however, that the experience of sacredness — including qualities of a specific space, building, or site designed to serve a specific liturgical life — are not in fact limited to any religious tradition as such. Many former churches are repurposed after non-destructive deconsecration precisely because there is something special about the atmosphere they provided, something recognized, appreciated, and deemed worth preserving by the broader public.

The groundswell of opposition to demolition in the case of Immaculate Conception suggests precisely this to me. We should pause, therefore, and provide time to determine just what is at risk of being lost, time to consider the potential for adaptive reuse that honors the qualities of this treasured site. Such a development could become a legacy rooted in the very best of the Roman Catholic Church: its proclamation of catholicity and the universal values of faith, hope, and love. The prospects of cooperation on this front across all parties is unknown, but granting a demolition permit would foreclose the very possibility.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Timothy Parker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Timothy Parker, PhD  
Graduate Program Director  
Associate Professor, History & Theory of Architecture & Art  
School of Architecture + Art, Norwich University

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