Dear Holy Family Parishioners,

I have some difficult news to share with you.  As many of you know I met with Bishop Sirba and his advisers and members of the Ecclesia Domestica Board today in Duluth.  We were hoping to get some clarity on the issue of whether Ecclesia Domestica would be allowed to take over the parish facilities and run it as a retreat center.

The meeting began with Ecclesia Domestica sharing about their ministry and the work that they have done and a bit on their history.  I think the Bishop and his staff were happy with the work the Ecclesia has been doing. They see this as a good work, especially seeing these men take initiative to share the faith.

Next the Bishop and his staff shared some of their concerns about the proposal.  These included things like:

What is the canonical status of Ecclesia Domestica, they are recognized by the state of MN as an organization, but under church law they do not have a status. They are not a religious order or an Association of Lay Faithful.  This status would be important if they are going to run a facility in any Diocese as a Catholic Group.  Ecc. Dom. said they are working on this, but they aren't sure where they are at in the process.

Next question regarded their practice with safe environment training, do their members who do the retreats have this training, and do the priests and deacons who help them on their retreats have this training as well as letters of suitability (which just means they are in good standing in their respective Diocese).  Currently Eccl. Dom. hasn't had to deal with this issue, but it is something they have talked about and could probably work out. If a facility is run as a Catholic retreat center and something happens especially if a member of the clergy is accused the Diocese could be liable (as has been shown in several of the cases in the Diocese where incidents didn’t happen on parish property).

After these questions it was suggested that these things should be worked out first before we could really enter into an agreement with them.  It is hard to know how long that would take.  It seems simple, but it depends on what the Bishop of St. Cloud does.

Another issue came to the surface as the conversation continued.  The Diocese Presbyteral council (a group of priests who advise the Bishop) would need to give approval for the giving of the property to Eccl. Dom.  The Vicar General said that it was not likely that they would accept such a proposal, that kind of deal hasn't been done before.  No amount was talked about, but it was clear from these statements, that Eccl. as part of the deal would need to purchase the property not be given it. (As you know we had been talking about giving the property to Eccl. Dom.) This may be a frustration for us because we had shared with the Bishop our thoughts on this, and the Diocese never said anything about the money until later. I took this as at least plausible acceptance of that concept, but I am seeing that it was more of permission to continue the conversation. Sometimes from their perspective they don’t want to say much until they understand what is being proposed or what is being asked.

The members of Eccl. Dom. pretty much said that was a deal breaker, because they don't have money to purchase the land.  The Bishop said something to the effect... in the past properties have been sold for far less then market value. In other words, we are talking about $850,000.  It was reiterated that the council would have a difficult time accepting a proposal to give the property away.

So from Eccl. Dom.’s side the money is the major issue. The other pieces they could probably come up with in time. From the Diocese perspective they don’t want to do a deal before the issues are resolved and without money exchanging hands. Even if we had asked for an amount, I don’t believe they would have said an amount.

So as it stands, this deal that we had been working on with Eccl. Dom. Is off, unless something changes. Which means we need to come up with an alternative plan. Time is running short we are down to around $12,000. Thankfully summer is on the way when expenses will hopefully be less. But even so, we have the septic system issues to resolve.

At our next parish meeting which is next week April 9th 5:30 PM, we will talk about this in more depth, though I don’t know what more can be said. Also, we can talk about what April 28th will entail. I know a lot was riding on this meeting and since it didn’t go the way we were hoping it may make that day even more difficult for people. I had heard from several people asking why we are doing a last Mass, I got the impression from them they aren’t really interested in that. I relayed this to the Bishop at the Meeting last Tuesday, and he said he is open to the idea of just having a meeting with you the parishioners so that you can ask him your questions, or express your frustrations. He knows, and acknowledges this has not been easy for you. I know he wants to give you a chance to speak your minds to him. I am pretty certain though that he will not change his mind. He will listen with compassion, and be sympathetic, but he sees it as a decision that was made back in 2012. We will talk about this, and have some discussion of what are legitimate options for going forward.

I continue to hold you all in prayer, especially since I know this will be disappointing for you.

-Fr. Eli