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Mr Adrian Atmore
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9 February 2020

Dear Mr Atmore

Thank you very much for your letter of 27 January and the enclosure with it. I am very grateful to you for writing to me on behalf of the parishioners of St Thomas More Parish, West Malling.

Please let me begin by saying it was never my intention to cause any upset to the parish. Had I known that the agreements which I believed were in place were, in fact, not as firm as they should have been, I would not have sent the letter to the parish. I am sorry that this was so unsettling for the parish community and I am committed to finding a way forward.

My genuine belief, based on the information I received, was that the letter I sent to the parish was requested and endorsed by Fr Peter and members of the parish finance committee. I was told that there had been a number of meetings about the various proposals for the site and that Officers of the Archdiocese had put forward a number of options. It was, I was informed, the decision of Fr Peter and members of the parish finance committee to move forward with the proposed sale of the whole site.

I was asked to write a letter outlining this which I forwarded to Fr Peter. He acknowledged it by email to me saying: *'Thank you very much for your letter to us and the work you and the Diocese have put into this. I will read the letter out at our Masses this weekend and have copies for the people to take home. I ask your prayers as*

*I do this as it will be difficult but it will be good as it will enable me to use this Christmas to help the people with this.'* This response seemed to support the request for the letter and demonstrate approval of it.

I was therefore surprised to see the content of the letter described as *'devastating'* in the local media. Understandably, parishioners and other people in the local community were upset and angry.

The subsequent clarification I issued on 11 January attempted to address this misunderstanding:

> *'Since my letter of 20 December 2019 to the Catholic Community of the Parish of St Thomas More, West Malling, there has been contact from a number of individuals and media outlets, together with an online petition. The Letter never proposed the closure of the parish, but the relocation of liturgical, spiritual and pastoral provision for the Catholic community of around 250 people who attend Mass each weekend across three Sunday Masses. This has been prompted by the urgent need to address the problems of the site as a whole on which, alongside other buildings, the presbytery and church are located.*
>
> *I am sorry for any upset caused by this letter. It was issued following a series of meetings, over a number of months, between Diocesan Officers, the Parish Priest, Fr Peter Soper, and representatives of the Parish Finance Committee. The proposal it contained was endorsed fully by all involved. The Letter was requested, and acknowledged gratefully, so that its content could be shared with the parish community. In the course of this there seems, sadly, to have been a breakdown in communication.*
>
> *In order to move forward in a constructive manner, Fr Peter has proposed an open parish meeting from which written suggestions about how to resolve the challenges faced will be collated. These will then inform our ongoing future collaboration towards a sustainable solution in the service of the Church's mission. I would ask you to please do all you can to support this process positively as we seek to work together. With the assurance of my prayers and very best wishes.'*

I was very grateful for Fr Peter's proposal that there should be an open parish meeting to try and move forward on a more collaborative basis. I appreciate the difficult situation in which Fr Peter found himself and was equally thankful

when he shared with me the text he said he would read out at the beginning of that meeting on 16 January by way of explanation. This stated:

*'I want to begin this meeting with an apology to the Diocese and yourselves for a misunderstanding between myself and the Diocese which was my fault and affected the statement made by the Archbishop.*

*At our meeting with the Diocese on 3rd December we discussed the selling of the property and the professional advice received that the best way to achieve this would be the sale of the whole site (a) to give privacy to the site and (b) to give the developer the opportunity to offset the tremendous cost of the repairs to the house by being able to develop the other parts of the site.*

*The Diocese then put forward the idea of looking at "smaller packages", one of which would be keeping the church but looking at it from the point of view of selling the house with the requirements and advice listed above. I strongly stated that, regretfully, we needed to sell the whole site to achieve this.*

*This led to the Diocese issuing the statement to put the whole site up for sale that we received. That gave the impression that they were not open to keeping the church – which is not the case. The Diocese want me to express to you that they will be very open to keeping the church, but need us to give them good reasons and ideas of why it should be done and how it can be done to fit in with the requirements of the development.*

*Following the meeting and the issue of the Diocesan statement, a great many people came up to me and said that, while they accepted that the house, pre-school and parish centre had to go, they were against the church being sold as well. I had also come to realise after the meeting that, as the Diocese could not afford to get us a permanent site and new church at the moment, that the keeping of the church became important and this was reflected in my statement.*

*I realise now that this unfairly put the Diocese in a bad light and made the proposition more drastic and I apologise sincerely for this. Also that this may have contributed to the idea going round that this means the closure of the parish, which is definitely not the case. I apologise sincerely to the Diocese and yourselves for the way this has caused misunderstanding between us and ask you to make all this known to others.*

*But the positive side of this is that the Diocese is giving us new incentive in the purpose of our meeting tonight to give them reasons for keeping the*

*church and ideas that can show how we can do this to fit in with the development of the rest of the site.'*

We are now in a place where, hopefully, there is a clearer sense of both the necessity and desire to collaborate more effectively in seeking to address both the challenges and opportunities of the West Malling site and the pastoral needs of the Catholic community of St Thomas More's parish.

To be clear, there is no plan to close the parish and no action will be taken in spring regarding the future of the site as originally stated. The priority now is to look together at how we move forward.

I would be very happy to meet with you and the key members of your working group, together with Officers from the Archdiocese. In order to facilitate this, I wonder if you would be kind enough to send me your contact details - email or phone - so that we can make arrangements concerning a mutually convenient date and time. This will probably be easier than me trying to work through the parish office which is the only contact information on your letter.

I very much look forward to hearing from you.

With very best wishes
Yours sincerely in Christ

✠ John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark

Cc. Mgr Matthew Dickens, Vicar General
Canon John O'Toole, Episcopal Vicar for Kent
Fr Peter Soper, Parish Priest of St Thomas More and Dean of Maidstone
Mr Paul McCallum, Diocesan Director of Finance