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20 December 2019

To the Catholic Community of West Malling

Dear Friends in the Catholic Community of West Malling

I write to you as your new Archbishop on a subject that I know will be close to you heart.

Since coming to the Archdiocese in July, I have been made aware of the challenges of sustaining the properties of The Hermitage, St Thomas More's Catholic Church and the adjacent nursery. I have visited the site and seen the situation for myself.

As you will be aware, a major maintenance issue arose earlier this year with the collapse of part of the parapet into the roof above Fr Peter's accommodation. This is obviously a serious concern. Following further investigations into the state of the building, it has become clear that there are substantial maintenance issues with The Hermitage, which will be extremely expensive to resolve. The cost of these repairs and the on-going maintenance of the property is now beyond the means which the Archdiocese and parish can reasonably afford.

Following consultation with Father Peter and representatives of the Parish, and after discussion with the Trustees of the Archdiocese concerning the future of the property, the decision has been taken to make the whole site (The Hermitage, St Thomas More Church and the nursery) available for sale in Spring 2020. Offering the whole site for sale will ensure maximum flexibility in any potential transfer.

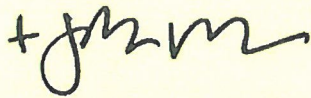
I appreciate that change of this kind can be very unsettling. Given the financial situation, however, there does not seem to be any other viable solution to the difficulties we now face.

I would like to assure you that arrangements will be made for the celebration of Mass in West Malling and for accommodation for Fr Peter. Options for alternative arrangements regarding this are in hand and information will be forthcoming about this as soon as it is available. We will ensure that spiritual and pastoral provision is made available in the best way possible. In the interim, I would ask you to do all you

can to maintain a positive spirit within the parish community, working with Fr Peter to enable this transition in due course.

Thank you for your kindness and understanding.

With very best wishes and the assurance of prayers



The Most Rev John Wilson
Archbishop of Southwark

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STATEMENT FROM FR. PETER SOPER

The news that the Diocese intends to make St. Thomas More Church, the St. Thomas of Canterbury Centre and Pre-School and the Priest's & Bishop's House available for sale this coming Spring have been a devastating blow for us. The Church is the centre of our Parish and means so much to us. The St. Thomas of Canterbury Centre and Pre-School is the result of many years of work, giving and sacrifice to convert the stable block to a really good facility. And the House has many memories especially for myself as Parish Priest here for the last 20 years.

While many of us accept that the House, with all its problems and the massive cost of repairs, and the Centre & Pre-School which is an integral part of the property, have to go, we have strong feelings that the Church should not be sold as it is so much the centre of our Community.

I am greatly heartened, encouraged and thankful for the on-line petition opposing this which was put out last Sunday (22nd December) and reached nearly 1,000 signatures by Christmas Eve and continues to grow and for all the support shown by many people. I am very grateful for this.

It is right that we should be able to express our genuine Sadness, anger and feelings about this, which I myself feel very much. But we now need to look at this calmly and Practically if we are to find the true way ahead.

We need to show the Diocese how big and Strong and vibrant our Catholic Community is and, to this end, I ask those of our community who are not coming regularly to our services and being involved in our church community to come back and help us ^{with} this. This will help us to truly speak to the Diocese.

I am planning to hold a Parish Meeting in the first part of January where we can calmly look at this and prepare Practical suggestions on the way forward and especially why the church must be kept on (and the building up of our church community that I'm asking for above will be a vital part of this) and the way that this can be done to fit in with the Property that is to be sold - which we can then bring to the Diocese.

Arrangements are also being looked into to see if we can accommodate the Pre-School in our More Park Parish School from this coming September and we have an assurance from the Diocese that the Pre-School will continue in the St. Thomas & Canterbury centre until this July even if the site is sold (they will lease it back from the Developers)

We are a strong Community and I think those who have and are making it so and we are not afraid to take this on and work out the right way ahead - and become even stronger through this - and we ask your prayers & support.

Thank you - & God Bless,

Fr. Peter

Fr. Peter Soper - Parish Priest

27th. December 2019