NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

JPII Center still looking for buyer

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Apr. 12, 2011

WASHINGTON -- A Michigan-based order of women religious interested in purchasing the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington has announced it does not have the funds to do so, putting the multimillion-dollar facility back on the market.

The center, which opened in 2001 with financial backing from the Detroit Archdiocese, has experienced financial difficulties throughout its history as it never attracted the number of visitors it expected. In 2006, because of low attendance rates, it discontinued museum activities and focused on being a place of research on the pontiff.

The Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist signed an agreement with the Archdiocese of Detroit last August to buy the facility as a house of studies for the order, but the order said in March it decided not to go through with the purchase after determining it would cost too much to remodel the space to meet the needs of the order's members.

In a letter to supporters, the head of the order, Dominican Mother Mary Assumpta Long, said the "level of financial support to undertake the project was lacking." She added that the sisters "discerned that to pursue this endeavor was not a prudent use of our limited resources." The letter was dated March 2.

The fast-growing order, founded in 1997 in Ann Arbor, has been featured twice on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." The average age of sisters in the order is 26. The sisters are currently looking to build convents in Texas and California.

The idea for a Catholic center in Washington honoring Pope John Paul II was the brainchild of Cardinal Adam J. Maida in 1998 when he was bishop of Green Bay, Wis. The center was unveiled during his tenure as archbishop of Detroit, where he served from 1990 until his retirement in 2009. The cardinal envisioned the center as a papal equivalent to presidential libraries and as a place where Catholics could explore their faith and church teachings. It evolved into a cultural center.

When it opened, the cardinal had raised about $50 million for the center, from thousands of donors. The Detroit Archdiocese loaned $17 million directly to the center and also guaranteed its $23 million mortgage.

Located on 12 acres near The Catholic University of America, the center cost $75 million to build and the property has been valued at $37.7 million. The selling price had not been disclosed.

The center is now overseen by a foundation chaired by Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington.

In a column posted on the archdiocesan website, Detroit Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron, Cardinal Maida's successor, discussed recent developments regarding the center. The website also has posted answers to frequently asked questions about the facility.

In his column, the archbishop said he is often asked about the center and noted that the archdiocese was "continuing its efforts" to sell the building and property.

He said that when he became archbishop he convened a commission to review the financial status of the archdiocese, including "significant loans to establish and maintain the cultural center" that totaled $54 million. Loan funds were not diverted from the archdiocesan priests' pension fund or the archdiocesan endowment fund.

The archbishop said the archdiocese offered the loans in "better economic circumstances based on a business model that proved to be unsustainable." The number of visitors and event bookings at the center fell short of projections, he said, and made the center "unable to service the loans made by the Detroit Archdiocese."

"Given different needs and priorities for the church in southeast Michigan, the archdiocese will continue to market the cultural center's building and land for sale, which will enable the archdiocese to recoup some of its investments in the center," he wrote.

The question-and-answer section about the center noted "interest from potential buyers" in the property.

It said the Detroit Archdiocese does not financially support the center's operations but it is providing approximately $65,000 per month to keep the building and grounds in good condition. It also said it was "unlikely that the archdiocese will recover its full investment."

To avoid committing large amounts of funds to single projects in the future, Archbishop Vigneron has implemented new policies and procedures for the management of archdiocesan operating funds, the loan deposit program, endowments and other accounts.

According to the archdiocese, the new policies "exceed standards required by canon law statutes and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in areas of diocesan financial responsibilities."

In the days after Pope John Paul II's death in 2005, hundreds of people visited the cultural center filling more than 10 books with condolence messages.

Currently, the cultural center is open on weekdays by appointment only.

During the weekend of Pope John Paul's May 1 beatification, the center will sponsor several events including movies, panel discussions and displays of John Paul II photographs, memorabilia and artifacts from the center. A full schedule of events will be posted on the center's website, www.jp2cc.org.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/13/2016 - 13:45*): http://ncronline.org/news/jpii-center-still-looking-buyer