

The Vatican II monster claims another victim. This beautiful shrine (that holds the tomb of St. Katherine Drexel) is not far from where I grew up in Philadelphia. It really gives me a heavy heart. Oremus - John Vennari

by Emily Babay,

(Philly.com) The religious order founded by St. Katharine Drexel has decided to sell the 44-acre Bensalem estate housing its mother house and the shrine with the saint's tomb.

Facing the plight of other orders with declining numbers and aging membership, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament also announced Tuesday it would sell more than 2,200 acres in Virginia, where two schools for black students founded by St. Katharine had been located.

"The properties are too large for our current and future needs, and for our financial resources," Sister Donna Breslin, the order's president, said in a telephone interview. She said the decision to sell was made "after prayer, study and reflection."

The motherhouse in Bensalem holds the tomb for St. Katharine, who established the religious order in 1891, died in 1955 and was canonized in 2000.

St. Katharine, the second American-born saint, left her prominent Philadelphia family to found the order and poured her \$20 million fortune into it.

The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament said the shrine at 1663 Bristol Pike would remain open to visitors through the end of 2017.

St. Katharine's remains will be moved to the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Center City. No timeline has been set for the move.

"We feel like this is Mother Katharine leaving one home but coming to her other home," Breslin said.

In a statement, Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput called it "an honor and a blessing to accept this responsibility" for the care of the saint's remains.

The order said it was working with a firm to help find new homes for the sisters now living at the Bensalem motherhouse.

It plans to use the proceeds from the sales for its ministry work and to support retired

sisters.

“Our hope is that it will allow us to continue forward our mission, and to ensure the care of our sisters,” Breslin said. Still, she noted, the decision leave the order’s longstanding motherhouse comes with sadness.

“It is leaving home,” she said. “It’s not easy. But we believe this is what God is asking of us.”

The order’s archives and administrative officers are also affected by the sale.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia will take over care of much of the archival materials, which include writings by St. Katharine, documents from the congregation’s history and records kept by sisters over the years.

The Archdiocese will “work collaboratively with the sisters to make sure their archival records are cared for appropriately,” Chaput said.

The order hopes to keep its administrative offices in the Philadelphia region, though it is only in the early stages of planning for a new site.

Also being sold is a Powhatan, Va., property that was acquired by St. Katharine’s brother-in-law in the early 1890s and later transferred to the congregation.

The order said it has retained Plante Moran REIA to serve as a real-estate investment advisor to manage the sales of both properties, two of the congregation’s largest sites.

The news of the sale comes as the order prepares to mark its 125th anniversary this summer, but faces a declining membership and financial strains – a plight shared by most Roman Catholic religious orders.

The congregation once boasted more than 600 members; today, it counts 104 sisters, more than half of whom are retired. About 50 sisters live at the Bensalem motherhouse.

Some of the 10 buildings, half of which were built before 1933, on the Bensalem campus have not seen much use for as many as eight years, the order said. Two of the buildings are vacant, others are under-utilized and the aging structures require constant maintenance, Breslin said.

And while other ministry work has taken place at the Virginia properties since the St. Francis de Sales and St. Emma schools closed in the early 1970s, officials said continuing those efforts was no longer financially sustainable.

Breslin said no asking price had been set for the properties. The order will work with its adviser to evaluate proposals that come in, she said, and hopes “prospective buyers appreciate the sacredness of these grounds.”

Bensalem Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo said he was “saddened and shocked” by the move.

“I pray these sacred grounds can be saved in some manner,” DiGirolamo said in a statement, noting that he attended St. Charles Borromeo Elementary School, located across the street from the shrine, and had met St. Katharine “many times.”

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