

Statement on behalf of the Parishioners of St Mary's Church Marple Bridge in relation to the threatened closure of their Church

CLOSURE OF A CHURCH PURSUANT TO CANON LAW

The Closure of a Church is governed by Canon 1222 of the Code of Canons. Canon 1222(1) applies if a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship - clearly not relevant to St Mary's. Canon 1222(2) provides as follows:-

"Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral Council, can relegate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby".

Closure of a church pursuant to Canon 1222 requires consultation by or on behalf of the parish priest with parishioners, the parish pastoral council, the parish finance committee, schools, other Catholic organisations, the deanery and any major benefactor or similar. None of this was done before or has been done since the Bishop's letter of 28th January 2025.

A church can only be closed by a Bishop's Decree relegating the church. The Decree must include a summary of the grave reasons and must contain information about the availability of recourse/appeal against the decision. It must also describe the process which has been followed in order to reach the decision. It should also state what is to happen to the building such as its demolition or sale. The letter of 28th January 2025 is not a Decree and contains no information about recourse/appeal, the decision process or the intentions of the Diocese with regard to the building. If there is no intention to sell the land and buildings, the letter could have informed the parishioners. We know that you accept that the letter is not a Decree.

We are now told that the term "closure" used in Bishop Patrick's letter refers only to the cessation of masses and the sacraments. He also refers to an amputation. That by any interpretation of the English language means permanent closure as does the promise of a "final mass at St Mary's in the coming months".

A church is a sacred place to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship. (Canon 1214).

We are told that there will be a final mass in the coming months but that there will be no canonical de-consecration if and until there has been a final decision about the church building and associated properties. We are left with a church to which, according to Canon Law, we have a right of entry for divine worship but we are excluded from it. It is shut and the doors are locked but it is not closed. That makes no sense.

Any consultation to fulfill the requirements of Canon 1222 will be impossible if it takes place after the church has been closed for a period of time. Those being consulted would be faced with a fait accompli and would be bound to question the point of the consultation.

We now have a questionnaire from the Bishop but the responses to it will only be considered after Easter ie after closure which effectively pre-judges the issue.

GRAVE REASONS

The Diocesan Property Manual sets out a list of reasons which themselves are not grave

reasons but cumulatively could be. These are:-

- 1 A general plan in the Diocese to reduce the number of churches.
- 2 The church is no longer needed
- 3 The Parish has been suppressed
- 4 The number of parishioners has decreased
- 5 Closure will not harm the good of souls
- 6 A desire to propose the unity of the parish
- 7 Some potential future cause which has not actually happened yet.

Not one of these reasons is cited as a primary factor underlying the decision to close St Mary's.

We know of no general plan to reduce the number of churches. The Bishop's letter and the email from Mr Lawes read as though this is a decision confined to just our church. St Mary's Church is needed. The Parish has not been suppressed. Closure will harm the good of souls. Bishop Patrick supports this view with his statements that "the closure of a church feels like an amputation" and is "a wound to the community". The Parish will not be united by the closure. The parishioners of the former parish of St Mary's are likely to attend Holy Spirit rather than The Annunciation.

Some parishioners are disappointed that an "Ageing Mass Going Population" can be accepted as a primary factor underlying the decision to close the church. It suggests that older people are of no importance or use to the Church and that their spiritual needs don't matter. Judging by the attendance at Mass this Sunday (9th March) and at previous Masses the assertion is not accurate. Younger generations are well represented. Maybe the number attending Mass has decreased but those who regularly attend Mass are not the only parishioners.

Bishop Patrick says that it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide regular masses. Difficult but not impossible. He also says that the Diocese must ensure that pastoral care is provided effectively. Pastoral care in the former St Mary's parish is more likely to be provided by the Diocese of Shrewsbury if St Mary's closes.

Bishop Patrick refers to nearby provision for Mass and Sacraments. Glossop is seven miles from St Mary's and New Mills is five miles away. According to AA Route Planner getting to either involves a journey of approximately twenty minutes by car. That is a forty minute round trip. Holy Spirit is just over a mile away but parking there is limited. The suggestion that Mass will continue to be celebrated in New Mills and Glossop does not help parishioners in Marple Bridge who do not drive or do not have access to a car. There is no direct bus route to New Mills and the bus to Glossop does not run on Saturdays or Sundays.

Bishop Patrick relies on the assertion that fewer younger people are coming forward to sustain the life of the parish for the future. If St Mary's Church is closed, the likelihood of younger parishioners from Marple Bridge sustaining the life of the Parish of The Annunciation, New Mills is remote. Parishioners in Marple Bridge are far more likely to attend Holy Spirit in Marple or Our Lady and St Christopher's in Romiley. There will be no Catholic Marriages, Catholic Baptisms or first Holy Communions in Marple Bridge. There will be no funerals either.

According to the Diocesan Canonical Inspection Report of 24th May 2022, the children of

St Mary's School "participate in parish events" which "contributes to the strong sense of community and to the school's place at the centre of the local church family". If St Mary's Church is closed, the only community and local church family which will benefit from the school's contribution will be that of Holy Spirit, Marple, in the Diocese of Shrewsbury.

Financial Pressures are not included in the list of possible grave issues in the Diocesan Property Manual. St Mary's Parish has made a positive financial contribution to the Diocese over the years. The income from collections and rent from the Nursery can cover the cost of maintenance. If the church is closed and it and its grounds are not sold, there will still be a need to maintain the buildings and grounds. For these reasons we cannot understand how the Bishop can say that the cost of maintaining and operating St Mary's cannot be justified and that the parish cannot "justifiably" support the continuing care and costly maintenance.

We are told that "the long term future of St Mary's, including the church building and associated properties, has not yet been determined". This implies that the future of the church building and associated properties is currently under consideration. What possible options for their future are being considered?

COMMENTS AND CONCERNS OF PARISHIONERS AND OTHER RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS RELATING TO CLOSURE

"I don't know where to go for mass. It's made me feel quite sick. It is a shock"

"I'm worried about.....He looks ill since the news"

"I'm not sleeping properly since I heard the news"

"I've written out my final wishes and let my son know to have my service at St Mary's and to be buried in the graveyard, what will I do now"

Bishop Patrick tells us that churches in Glossop stand ready to receive our parishioners. Which churches in Glossop? Are priests and eucharistic ministers from Glossop going to travel to Marple Bridge to administer to the sick and dying. We doubt it. We are now told that the Bishop of Shrewsbury has given his assurance that pastoral provision will be available at Holy Spirit and other churches in his diocese. The burden will fall most heavily on the parish priest at Holy Spirit. We are sure he would bear that extra burden with good grace but is the Diocese of Nottingham happy for the pastoral care of some of their weakest parishioners to be devolved to another Diocese.

It is a proviso of Canon 1222(2) that the good of souls should suffer no detriment. Clearly there are souls in Marple Bridge who will suffer detriment if their church is closed. The proviso does not allow for possibility or probability. There must be certainty that there will be no detriment to souls. In other words, it is not open to anyone to decide that there possibly or probably won't be detriment to souls, they have to be sure and certain. In other words, there can be no reasonable doubt.

There may be restrictive covenants affecting the church which prevent its use for anything other than Catholic Divine Worship. The successors to the vendors of the church and surrounding land in 1921 may be persons who can legitimately claim rights in the Church for themselves (Canon 1222).

As parishioners of St Mary's we say that Canon Law does not allow the closure of a church in such an informal way and that there is no good or valid reason to close the church canonically.

We have the right of entry pursuant to Canon 1214 for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship. We, therefore, have legitimate rights (Canon 1222) in the Church of St Mary's, Marple Bridge and we do not consent to its closure.

We request that the Bishop Patrick's letter of 28th January 2025 and the threat of closure contained in it be withdrawn.

SHORT STATEMENT AT THE END OF THE MEETING

It is clear from what we have heard today from David that a decision has been made and will not be changed. Canon 1733 provides that when aggrieved by a decree it is desirable that the aggrieved person and the author of the decree avoid contention and take care to seek an equitable solution, possibly using mediation.

You have gone about this in the wrong way. Please withdraw the threat of closure and, then, if you are determined to go ahead with closure, please do it properly so that we have a right of recourse.