



Bids close to buy historic basilica in downtown St. John's

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The Roman Catholic archdiocese of St. John's is selling the basilica because it needs to pay survivors who endured physical and sexual abuse as young boys at the former Mount Cashel Orphanage, which once stood just three kilometres away from the historic church.

"It's absolutely inconceivable," O'Dea said in an interview Wednesday. "It's a terrible disgrace, but the disgrace is, of course, what the predatory priests did before."

A Supreme Court of Canada decision in January, 2021, left the church liable for abuse committed at the St. John's orphanage between the 1940s and 1960s. The archdiocese is now responsible for paying settlements to survivors.

Lawyer Geoff Budden, who worked on the case for over 30 years, said Wednesday he's heard from nearly 100 people who could be entitled to compensation. All the settlements combined could total \$50 million or more, he said.

In an effort to raise that money, the archdiocese is liquidating its properties. Eighteen churches in and around St. John's went up for tender on March 4, as did a small apartment complex, several schools and large parcels of vacant land, all owned by the archdiocese. Some of those churches are home to food banks and key community services, while others house treasured art collections.

At least one group has publicly declared its intent to bid on the basilica and its surrounding properties. St. Bonaventure's College, a Jesuit school that sits behind the cathedral and occupies one of the properties up for sale, posted a notice on its website saying it would submit a joint bid with the Basilica Heritage Foundation and the corporation that oversees the school's indoor ice rink. The foundation is a charity created in 1998 dedicated to the history and preservation of the cathedral.

history,” the May 11 notice says. “This is a big part of why we are dedicating significant efforts to safeguard this complex.”

Bids to buy the properties were due by 12:30 p.m. Thursday, and they had to include a deposit of 15 per cent of the amount offered.

Archbishop Peter Hundt said in an e-mail after the bids closed that some parishes submitted proposals to buy their churches.

“The outcome of the tender process will help to inform our plans for the future,” Hundt wrote. “The path ahead will be challenging, but it is necessary to support the healing process for victims, their loved ones, and the entire community of faith.”

The archdiocese oversees 34 parishes, and Budden said churches in rural Newfoundland are likely next to be sold. The province’s Supreme Court will ultimately decide which bids are successful, he added.

“The harm resonates in every direction,” Budden said. “These parishioners – you have to be pretty callous not to feel for them. I think you have to be even more callous not to feel for the survivors. It’s not a feel-good story.”

O’Dea is an expert in ecclesiastical architecture and he’s written extensively about the basilica in St. John’s and how its distinctively arched windows and twin towers were built atop one of the city’s highest hills in order to assert the Catholic Church’s dominance.

Though he’s not a practising Catholic himself, O’Dea said he’s connected to the basilica and the church through his family history. His grandparents helped with the building of various Catholic structures in the city, he said – Mount Cashel included.