

North American Martyrs' Shrine could have new ownership

By Kate Blain

Catholic News Service

ALBANY, N.Y. – Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger of Albany likes to term the future of the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs in Auriesville a “concelebration.”

As when priests celebrate a Mass together and each recites one portion of the prayers, he explained, various entities will be collaborating to ensure the shrine’s future.

However, the bishop cautioned that some of the information circulating in the secular media about plans for the shrine is premature: The planning process is still underway and is likely to continue for some time.

“The process could take the entire summer,” confirmed Carmine Musumeci, former New York state deputy of the Knights of Columbus and a leading member of the Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine Inc., a foundation of concerned Catholics formed by the Albany bishop.

The new not-for-profit organization currently has seven board members and several other interested parties participating in conference calls and other communications to discuss the shrine’s future, Musumeci told *The Evangelist*, Albany’s diocesan newspaper.

Not all of the participants are local; board members include Father Terry Brennan, a priest who ministers to Native American communities in New Mexico with a devotion to St. Kateri Tekakwitha; and John DeJak, co-editor of a forthcoming book, “With God In America,” featuring the writings of Jesuit Father Walter Ciszek. The priest wrote extensively while he was on retreat at the Auriesville shrine; his cause for sainthood is being considered.

Bishop Scharfenberger said he’d like to see the organization attain 503(c)(3) nonprofit status. If the planning process for the shrine continues, its ownership could eventually be transferred to the Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine.

However, the Jesuit order would retain its cemetery for priests and brothers on the shrine grounds, the cemetery’s related buildings and the portion of the property known as the “Martyrs’ Ravine,” where St. Isaac Jogues buried the remains of his fellow missionary, St. Rene Goupil, after he was martyred in the 17th century.

The ravine, where pilgrims to the shrine often pray, “is a sacred space important to the Jesuit community,” noted Bishop Scharfenberger.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs covers 400 acres in Auriesville on the site of the 17th-century Mohawk village of Ossernenon, where the “Lily of the Mohawks,” St. Kateri Tekakwitha, was born. Also called the Shrine of the North American Martyrs, the site includes a massive coliseum used for outdoor liturgies, several chapels, Stations of the Cross, a visitors’ center, picnic areas and the Jesuit cemetery.

The Jesuit order, facing a decreasing number of priests and the significant cost of the shrine’s upkeep, decided last year to discontinue staffing the site. The Jesuits have continued to provide for maintenance of the grounds through a company called Parish Property Management Inc.

Musumeci said the current annual operating budget for the shrine is about \$400,000 to \$450,000 and that the shrine is “self-sufficient,” with cash flow and donations covering expenses.

A fundraising campaign and radio-a-thon last year raised more than \$2 million for necessary repairs and renovations to several of the shrine’s buildings, including the coliseum – money Bishop Scharfenberger called “well spent.”

After Bishop Scharfenberger expressed interest last year in keeping sacramental ministry alive at the shrine, the Jesuit order offered to transfer ownership to the Albany Diocese. But in early May, the bishop reiterated, as he has stated previously, that “I don’t think the shrine can just be managed by one ecclesiastical entity.”

Keeping the shrine open, he said, is not a matter of “just transferring it” to another owner. In fact, Musumeci said he would like to see all eight Catholic dioceses in New York state involved in the shrine; to that, the bishop added religious orders and others nationwide.

A statement in an area newspaper that the Albany Diocese would be sending priests to celebrate Masses at the shrine every day is not only premature, Bishop Scharfenberger said, but does not account for the priests from outside the diocese who have expressed an interest in participating.

“I’m hopeful that will happen,” he added.

Bishop Scharfenberger and Musumeci both referred to the canon law concept of “alienation,” meaning taking the property out of church hands – something they say cannot happen.

Instead, the Jesuits have taken the initial step of leasing the shrine’s visitors’ center to the Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine. The center is being managed by local Catholic Julie Baaki and a few part-time employees and volunteers.

Musumeci said the foundation has purchased insurance to cover visitors’ center operations and will likely seek more volunteers and possibly a few additional paid employees in the future. So far, the center is only open on weekends.

Seven or eight groups have already requested use of the shrine for events this summer, Musumeci said. The Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine now oversees a

webpage run by the Jesuits at www.jesuitseast.org through which groups can reserve the shrine for events.

Musumeci foresees fund-raising for the shrine's future beginning soon, providing that an agreement is reached with the Jesuits, the foundation and all others involved, including the Jesuit superiors in Rome and the Vatican. He said he has "a reasonably high level of confidence" that the transfer of ownership to the Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine will proceed.

Bishop Scharfenberger envisions the shrine's future as focused on four things: evangelization; remembering the saints martyred there; honoring St. Kateri Tekakwitha and her connection with the Native American community; and continuing the tutelage and support of the Jesuit community in relation to the site.

"Many, many people have a great interest in the future of the shrine," he said. "There is no question the shrine has a prominent place in the hearts of many people."

Editor's note: For more information about the shrine, contact the Friends of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine at friendsofauriesville@gmail.com.

Also see:

St. Katharine Drexel Shrine, Blessed Sacrament motherhouse put up for sale