

NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

De-calendaring of 113th and 110th Street Parcels

12 November 2002

Testimony of The Very Reverend Dr. James A. Kowalski, Dean

Good afternoon. Thank you for this opportunity to address the Commission and to remark about the relationship of the Cathedral's mission to these matters before the Landmarks Commission.

In 1982, I became the Rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut. It was my first assignment as head priest and presented a special challenge. The Church, consecrated in 1869, and its companion parish house, formally opened in 1896, are both National Historic landmarks. In 1982, however, the seven-acre parcel was no longer a thriving community alongside the Colt Firearms factory. The great Industrial Revolution that had made Hartford a wealthy river city had long shifted into new economic chapters. The apartments around the church property, built after World War II, had been converted into city-owned subsidized housing. I was the landlord of 112 "Section 8" units owned by and in the backyard of the church. Only 18 people were attending church. The parish house leaked and was boarded up. Both properties - magnificent poly-chromatic, high Victorian Gothic masterpieces - were targets of regular vandalism as well as succumbing to the decline of ongoing deferred maintenance and wear and tear.

For eleven years I worked with an increasing number of parishioners, various community residents, the Colt Trustees, Hartford's Probate Court, the State Superior Court, and with Hartford's City government to rebuild that church, to revitalize its neighborhood, and to expand its city-wide ministries. All of those objectives were connected to our ability to repair and to conserve the sacred trust of those landmarks, which was reclaimed as an historic district. I learned that fiscal and programmatic credibility and discipline go hand in hand. I learned that buildings anchor program and mission, that they foster and sustain commitments, and that they broadcast the messages that "We are here for you" and "We are here to stay."

It has been painfully clear to me that religious institutions that do not attend to their financial health cannot sustain their own internal responsibilities. If they cannot care for

the needs of their own congregants, those institutions decline from within. Without a base of ongoing support, they discover, sooner or later, that they cannot sustain their responsibilities in social ministries and outreach. My generation of clergy has built fewer new buildings than other generations; our leadership has been measured more in terms of how we respond to years of deferred repairs. I have seen that focus as integrally related to what I was ordained to do. No sponsored or subsidized program or ministry can be strong for long, unless its sponsor or parent organization is also strong.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine represents a dream of a great American cathedral in the City of New York. The Episcopal Diocese, in laying the cornerstone in 1892, was building more than its mother church and religious institution. 1892 was the same year when this country's doors were flung open, and Ellis Island became the gateway which welcomed over 70 percent of the immigrants who would seek opportunity in and bring talent to this country. As we struggle with what it means to be secure, after September 11, in a society intended to be porous, do we need that dream less? My forebears came through that gateway. I cannot tell you what it means to me each time I see the great bronze doors of this Cathedral and know that they were cast in the same studio that created the Statue of Liberty. Did those Trustees and a denominational Diocese reach too high, or build something too big? How can we, in our time, position ourselves to live into a dream intended to serve a wide variety of peoples and a far reaching mission, and therefore channel the support it deserves and requires, across time and over generations? We come to the Landmarks Commission as a first step in a process that will enhance those ministries and beautify the buildings and grounds that enfold and anchor them. We come to you as fiduciaries, both financially and architecturally, knowing that we will be judged by whether or not we did our part and what is best for the Cathedral and its constituent communities, in our generation.

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine is the mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and serves as the seat of our Bishop. But it was built to be more than that. It was separately chartered in the State of New York as "a house of prayer for all people and a unifying center of intellectual light and leadership." That mission statement articulates the very soul of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The Cathedral serves the many diverse people of our City, Nation and World: liturgically, culturally, pastorally, educationally, and as the great architectural and historic site that is its legacy. Its beautiful and peaceful grounds and gardens offer respite and nourishment to residents of and visitors to our neighborhood. This Cathedral is a religious institution, of course. But it is also most assuredly a great civic and community institution whose events and programs, public buildings and spaces, have a reach much farther than most churches or cathedrals:

- Adults and Children in Trust served nearly 500 young people this summer, and over 1,500 in "Holiday Camps" during school breaks.

- After School programs serve up to ninety at the cathedral.
- Some 114 children benefit from pre-school programs at the Cathedral.
- Cathedral Community Cares offers emergency responses to walk-in clients each day, and 1,361 last year.
- At any given time, 8 male clients live in our shelter, as they move toward self-sufficiency, and 38 different clients were sheltered last year.
- Our Soup Kitchen is one of few open on Sundays, and it serves 23,460 meals a year.
- In partnership with Episcopal Charities, Cathedral Community Cares has provided crisis counseling and eviction mediation since many in our neighborhood were affected by 9/11.
- Our Public Education and Visitor Services department offers exhibitions, tours, hands-on-workshops, and special events that usually attract hundreds of thousands of international tourists (those numbers were down after 9/11 and our own fire last year). Some 23,360 people from schools, church groups, and groups on cultural tours from the greater metropolitan area and all over the country came to the Cathedral last year.
- The Cathedral is one of the most visited tourist attractions in the City. Stores and restaurants on the Upper Westside notice each time a recession impacts tourism. Congressman Charlie Rangel has made it clear to me -- one Dean to another, as he said it -- that the Cathedral is depended on as the gateway to Harlem.
- The Cathedral School, an Episcopal School for children K-8 of all faiths, was among the first private schools to work hard to build diversity, offering scholarships to 40 percent of the 259 students. These students and their parents benefit from the special environment of the Cathedral, in a rigorous academic and value-based teaching environment. They learn religious understanding and tolerance across faiths, something surely not needed less today than when the school was first part of the Cathedral's mission.
- Cathedral Productions and art exhibitions offer a wide array of performing and visual art. They are cultural and spiritual opportunities, both interfaith and cross-cultural. Few religious institutions in the world could match this Cathedral's tradition of supporting the arts.

- Each year some of New York's most popular and best attended arts events happen at the Cathedral: the free New York Philharmonic Memorial Day concert; the New Year's Eve Concert for Peace; and the Celebration of Creation: Feast of Saint Francis, or the blessing of the animals.
- Right now we have the extraordinary art exhibition from Spain and their Cathedral foundation: "Time to Hope," a gift on the anniversary of 9/11 and here until December 6th -- 101 treasures displayed in the chapels and ambulatory, attracting up to two thousand visitors a day. Since it opened at the end of September, the exhibit has attracted over 55,000 visitors.
- Last Saturday night I welcomed 1,200 to the 12th Interfaith Holocaust Remembrance concert.
- We have an internationally renowned textile conservation and repair and cleaning laboratory, used by museums all over the world, including clients such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Getty Museum. The laboratory serves also as a training and internship site for apprentice conservators from universities throughout this country, Canada, and Europe.
- Our Nightwatch overnight retreat program draws nearly 2,500 youth a year, and another 340 for a Diocesan "Super Night watch." They may not all be explicitly religious, or attached to a particular denomination or parish, but those who come to the Cathedral for such a weekend retreat often come back and speak for years about the impact of the experience.

Our conversations with developers regarding the unused, perimeter parcels are directly connected to our mission as a Cathedral. They are directly connected to what it means to be

good stewards of the Close. That is so not only because of the positive impact on the ongoing funding of core mission programs. The stewardship will reach also to capital repairs of buildings already on the Close, some of which are older than the Cathedral. That stewardship will impact the grounds as well, building the capacity to beautify and respect with even greater care these important buildings and spaces. I share the commitment of the Trustees that not all revenues would be spent on operating budgets. We also will distribute funds to capital repairs and to the repayment of drained endowment principal. The possibilities along the north and south perimeters, the Bishop and the Cathedral Trustees and I pledge, will be:

- congruent with the mission of the Cathedral and the Diocese;

- aesthetically consistent with the magnificent Close (may I emphasize here that there are various configurations, densities, heights and approaches that could be used in any development; out of respect for the architectural importance of the Cathedral, the Trustees, the Bishop and I have made the commitment to restrict such development, and to insist that future design review will ensure that any buildings would literally be "in dialogue with" the Cathedral and the existing spaces and buildings on the Close);
- and, as the third principle, that what is developed must significantly accrue to the long-term financial benefit of the Cathedral.

Certainly such development is necessary for us to move considerable steps toward financial stability, and away from what is now a hand-to-mouth existence. Such construction also will give us ways to think together about how we will rebuild and then finish the north transept. I believe thinking strategically, with a solid financial foundation built and 20 million dollars of deferred maintenance addressed, we will then - credibly - be able to raise the funds necessary to complete the Cathedral. I come on board as Dean at a time when marvelous attention has been paid, reaching back ten years, to developing a strategic plan. Two Bishops; my immediate predecessor, Dean Harry Pritchett; Executive Vice President Stephen Facey; and the Trustees have exercised this strategic leadership. We ask your support as we build the fiscal credibility of the Cathedral, by building a solid infrastructure that will take us into this new century better capitalized than ever before in this Cathedral's history but also having sustained the architectural legacy of these important and sacred spaces. We also have built up our capacity to care for and beautify the kind of urban village on the Close the founders envisioned, and which we cherish and want to preserve as well.

I have been Dean for only nine months. One of the first duties I performed as Dean, however, was to contact our neighbors and civic and elected leaders to introduce myself, and to reaffirm plans - previously shared over some years - to move forward and to continue to work together as good neighbors. We come before you to create needed benefits for the Cathedral, and with its best interest in mind. That is our fiduciary responsibility. But we also see clearly that such benefits carry with them important and respected responsibilities. We pledge our stewardship of these buildings and grounds as a sacred, historic and cultural trust. And we pledge our responsibility to listen to, serve, and continue to be in relationship with all in our neighborhood and City of which we are a part and which we serve. We do not seek these resources simply to help the Cathedral for its own sake. Rather, we ask support of this strategy because the Cathedral has served and will in perpetuity serve a mission that radically embraces all people. We dare to say that we want to be the Cathedral for all people. With your help, this Cathedral will have more of the resources it needs to carry out that mission faithfully, respectful of the treasures of

its architectural legacy. With your help, this Cathedral will be strengthened as we live out the values of community, hospitality, witness and stewardship which undergird its mission.

Thank you for this hearing, and for all you do to preserve the great landmarks of this great City.