

Congregation for the Clergy
His Eminence Cardinal Beniamino Stello
Palazzo delle Congregazioni
Piazza Pio XII, 3
00193 Roma
Italia

Brummen, 7 April 2015

Appeal against the dismissal of our objection to the decree of 10 February 2015 from the Archbishop of Utrecht concerning the closure of St Andrew's Church (H. Andreas), Brummen. The dismissal of our objection is in the letter from Mgr. W.J. Eijk, Cardinal Archbishop of Utrecht, dated 23 March 2015, reference: 2015.01566, subject: dismissal of objection (verwerping bezwaarschrift)

Your Eminence,

Our primary purpose in appealing against the decree of 10 February 2015 is to safeguard the future of our faith community in Brummen together with the sacred edifice of our church. At present, the salvation of souls in our community is at risk.

We are members of a vital faith community in Brummen, the Netherlands. We have sufficient numbers of volunteers. We have sufficient viable ideas. We are financially healthy. This sound financial position is endorsed by Archbishop Eijk in his letter of 23 March 2015 in which he rejects our appeal.

At the heart of our community is St Andrew's Church. St Andrew's Church (built 1961) is fully paid for by the faith community. The community has also successfully paid for the upkeep of the church. Brummen had, has and shall have sufficient funding to cover operational expenses. As an extra, a safeguard is provided by the St Andrew's Foundation (Stichting St. Andreas) which was set up with the specific goal of guaranteeing the financial stability of the Catholic community in Brummen.

After careful study and consideration of the letter of 23 March 2015 which dismissed our objection and of the decree of 10 February 2015 we have to conclude that the dismissal and the decree were based on generic reasons and not on specific reasons. The argumentation is not specific to Brummen. The arguments used pertain to the parish as a whole. The decree and the dismissal of objection are based on a future situation, which the Archbishop and the parish council predict. The letter of the Congregation for the Clergy of 30 April 2013 (prot. no. 20131348) clearly states that neither "a general plan of the diocese to reduce the number of churches" nor a "potential future cause that has not actually happened" can in itself constitute a grave reason. We cannot find in the aforementioned missives anything that constitutes a grave reason to close our church at this present time.

The most important argument put forward in the dismissal of objection is the opportunistic fact that a buyer for the church has been found. The dismissal of objection states on page 3, item 6:

“Het parochiebestuur is overigens ook van mening dat het louter op basis van de huidige financiële exploitatie niet direct noodzakelijk was om de H. Andreaskerk te sluiten. Dat nu reeds gekozen is voor het onttrekken van de H. Andreaskerk aan de goddelijke eredienst kwam - ... – voort uit het feit dat zich een goede mogelijkheid voordeed tot verkoop van het kerkgebouw.”

Translation:

“The parish board does not think it necessary to close St Andrew’s Church based on only financial reasons. The choice to end the status of the St Andrew’s Church as a sacred edifice so soon, is brought about - ... – by the fact that a good opportunity presented itself to sell the church.”

It is the will of the Archbishop that our faith community blends in with an artificially created community surrounding the Eucharistic Centre. This can be seen in the dismissal of objection. Page 4, item 10 states:

“Inderdaad is de liturgie en met name de viering van de H. Eucharistie op zondag de natuurlijke plaats waaromheen rooms-katholieken zich als geloofsgemeenschap verzamelen. ... Ik wil u erop attenderen dat de aaneensluiting van geloofsgemeenschappen ook kansen biedt voor een nieuwe bloei van de geloofsgemeenschap. Met de bestuurlijke en pastorale stappen die worden gezet om parochianen samen te brengen op minder plaatsen dan voorheen, in het bijzonder ook in het eucharistisch centrum van de parochie, wordt beoogd om hun broeder- en zusterschap in het geloof te verstevigen. In mijn recente brief “Het geloof in Christus vieren en verbreiden in het derde decennium van de 21ste eeuw”, gepubliceerd op 23 november 2014, heb ik onder meer geschreven:

‘Om de kerntaken, voornamelijk de viering van de Eucharistie en de overige sacramenten te waarborgen, zijn in 2011 eucharistische centra aangewezen. Bij het verdwijnen van steeds meer lokale kerkgebouwen is het van belang dat er goede centra zijn waar de gelovigen terecht kunnen. Het moet alle parochianen een zorg zijn om aan de ontwikkeling van deze centra bij te dragen ...’”

The translation of the above quotation follows below.

“Indeed, it is in liturgy and especially in celebrating the Holy Mass on Sunday that the Roman Catholics naturally gather as a faith community. ... I want to point out to you that the stringing together of the faith communities also offers chances to the faith community to grow and blossom anew. The executive and pastoral measures taken to gather parishioners in fewer places than before, and especially in the Eucharistic Centre of the parish, are intended to strengthen their fraternity in the faith. In my recent letter “Celebrating and spreading the faith in Christ in the third decade of the 21st century”, published 23 November 2014, I wrote – amongst other things –

‘In order to safeguard the core activities, more specifically the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, Eucharistic Centres were designated in 2011. When more and more local churches disappear, it is of great importance to have well equipped centres where the faithful can gather. All parishioners should want to contribute to the goal of creating such centres...’”.

If the decree is executed and our church is sold, in conjunction with the ban of the Archbishop on regular celebrations, the heart of our faith community will be ripped out. All existing contacts with schools, the local youth and the elderly will evaporate. Our faith community will effectively cease to

exist. We do know that less than ten percent of our parishioners is prepared to go to the Eucharistic Centre and a large number will turn away from the institute of the Roman Catholic Church. The booklet 'Kerksluitingen niet nodig bij passende maatregelen' (No closing of churches by taking appropriate measures) (Meurs, Hoffmann, Gerritsen, Roelands, 2014) clearly shows this fact. The booklet is appendix 1 to this appeal. We also know of parishioners who are not (physically) able to go to the Eucharistic Centre. This means the salvation of the souls of a great number of parishioners would be at risk.

We have petitions with 133 signatures of support from our parishioners toward our appeal to the decree to change the status of sacred edifice of our St. Andrew's Church so it can be closed and sold. We sent them together with our first appeal to Archbishop Eijk.

Below we would like to elaborate on our arguments.

Vital local faith community

The local faith community in Brummen is not only a financially healthy community but also a vital community gathered around St. Andrew's Church. We possess extensive data to give substance to our claims. From the available data it appears that the number attending church services has stabilised and even risen since we have held a service every fortnight in the weekend. Furthermore our operating costs have never shown a deficit.

Celebrations in St Andrew's Church like Christmas, Easter and funerals as well as Easter- and Christmas Celebrations of our Roman Catholic primary school Saint Pancratius are visited by a great number of people. The space offered by St. Andrew's Church is barely enough in these cases, especially when the St. Pancratius' school pupils and their families gather in our church. Alternative locations mentioned by the parish council certainly do not offer the required space. More importantly, all of these activities will cease to exist when the church is closed and sold, as will other activities because of the role that St Andrew's Church plays in our faith community. At this point we must mention our elderly who attend a service each Wednesday morning and who are not sufficiently mobile to attend a service at a greater distance.

The action group in Brummen "Handen af van onze Kerk" (Hands off our church) is working out a viable vision for the future. This group is working on the substance of and preconditions for the future of our community. There is no immediate problem but we do realize that we will have to plan for the long term in order to be still viable in 2025. As a faith community we wish to connect even more with our village community by means of activities in the realm of caritas, evangelization and Eucharist. We have sufficient funds. We have sufficient volunteers. We have sufficient viable ideas. Thus far, however a discussion with the parish council about these issues has not been at all possible.

The episcopal policy of centralization and wholesale closure of churches

A policy of centralization and wholesale closure of churches has been chosen in the diocese for the purpose of gathering the believers around the dwindling number of priests in a Eucharistic Centre which is dictated by decree. We are not aware of measures taken by the parish board or the diocese to cut back costs or to generate extra income, most certainly not in Brummen. Because few believers are willing to abandon freely their local religious community, rigorous measures are being taken to realise the plans and policies of the episcopacy.

During the last year in the diocese we have regularly experienced what it means when a church closure is forced upon the faithful who then are forbidden to hold regular celebrations in their village or city. Especially in villages, less than ten percent of believers are willing to join the Eucharistic Centre. The other ninety percent ends up in the fast growing category of displaced Catholics.

Therefore it is not strange that the Archbishop expects, as can be seen from his letter of 23 November 2014, that in about ten years' time twenty or so churches of the original 336 churches will suffice to harbour the small number of "real Catholics" in his diocese. (N.B. the number of registered Catholics in the diocese is approximately 750,000). Consequently, it is not astonishing that a strong resistance against the Archbishop's plans has developed, not only from colleague bishops but also from the grass roots, from priests and parish councils. Does not Pope Francis state that a priest should come to his people, his flock, instead of expecting the flock always to come to him? A rift exists among the Dutch Bishops on this matter. This rift runs so deep and is so painful that it proves to be impossible for the Dutch Bishops' Conference to have a discussion on the matter.

Distance to the nearest church 7 km: No Church is safe.

Should St Andrew's church be compelled to close the nearest church will be 7km from Brummen. The Archbishop indicates in his letter of 23 November 2014 that ten years from now he himself expects that only 20 churches will remain open (at present there are between 320 and 336 churches open) in 20 parish conglomerates. In other words, the nearest church at a distance of 7 km will only be available temporarily. In item 6 the Archbishop names a number of churches which could serve as alternatives for the faithful of Brummen. The faithful could attend services there, is the assertion of the Archbishop, but we know that the churches in Loenen and Dieren are likely to close in the future as a result of the Archbishop's policy since they are not Eucharistic Centres. No church in the diocese is safe! We cannot believe it is the intention of the Archbishop to have us repeatedly go to yet another nearest church until finally the storm is over and we find the nearest church is perhaps 30 or more kilometres away?

Actually physical distance is not the most important. The emotional distance is much more relevant. Experiences elsewhere have shown that people are not willing to give up their faith community and to switch to a community with which no prior attachments exist. Here are a few quotes in this respect.

"The closing of a church has a devastating effect on the vulnerable faith community that centres on that church, and practically all possibilities to vitalise the church and faith community in that quarter or neighbourhood are thwarted."

"Results of studies of psychosocial effects of mandatory relocations are seamlessly applicable to the relocation of the place of worship. We are talking about an encroachment in the faith and certainty of religious people, the loss of the sense of "home", of known faces and known patterns. We are talking about the loss of an important network of religious people."

(Menco van Koningsveld (theologian and retired deacon in the archdiocese Utrecht, in *Communio* with the special theme "Closing churches And then?")

In the Diocese of Groningen – unlike the Diocese of Utrecht – Bishop De Korte does not deem it necessary to close two thirds of all churches in the diocese. In his diocese, Bishop De Korte will do everything in his power to continue to celebrate locally, even if the churches have to close. "When you close a church and tell parishioners to go to mass in the next village, 70 per cent will not show up. In that case what you are doing is destroying the church, as it were." (Quote from an article in *Noord Nederlands Dagblad*, December 7th 2013 on the occasion of the youngest *ad limina* visit and the publicity generated by it).

"The Diocese of Limburg will not close churches in villages." Bishop Frans Wiertz writes in a letter to the parishes. Closing churches in villages would have disastrous results, according to the Bishop. Even if it were better to close a church in a village when seen from an financial point of view, this cannot be accounted for pastorally, he writes. In cities there is usually an alternative available within a

reasonable distance. This is not the case in villages, the Bishop considers.”(Quotation from the article in De Limburger, January 17th 2014)

“Auxiliary Bishop Jan Hendriks of Diocese Haarlem-Amsterdam distanced himself earlier from the policy in Utrecht and Den Bosch. He deems the policy too rigorous. “In other dioceses, such as Utrecht and Den Bosch there have been radical interventions. Mergers of parishes into large units have been ordained. This image may also live in Noord-Holland. But it is not so. We want to act differently, with lots of consultation. Threatening with sanctions? Of course mergers must fit the total image, but we start with consultation.” And: “It will be very difficult”, assistant Bishop Jan Hendriks says with regard to the closure of church buildings. “It is very precarious. Rome wants to keep the churches open as much as possible.” (Quotation from article in Noordhollands Dagblad, January 29th 2013)

We do not only feel “cheated”, but “short-changed” as well

We, as a local faith community, feel that the obligatory merger into the parish Living Water was carried through under false pretences. Shortly before the signing of the merger contract by the contractors the contracting partners obtained the guarantee that the existence of the faith community would not be endangered and the identity and characteristic properties of the faith community would be guaranteed. Much to our surprise, no trace of this guarantee can be found in the definitive merger contracts, which were signed by our representatives in good faith.

In this respect, we quote:

“Each current parish (merger partner) can grow into a local faith community, of which the unique identity and strengths can be developed further. Each centre will be enabled to develop their style of liturgy.” In the original merger contracts it was stipulated that: “the identity and characteristic properties of the faith community shall be preserved”. (Quotation from, “Op weg naar missionaire geloofsgemeenschappen”, the policy document (2003) of Cardinal Simonis, former Archbishop of Utrecht.)

“When the Bishop hears of the anger and anguish from the people that stems from the closure of churches, than that anger is not about closure of churches. It is because they feel cheated by the diocese. They agreed to the mergers of parishes, because the diocese guaranteed that the movement towards larger parishes was not intended to dismantle local faith communities, but to ensure a future for them instead. Almost immediately after the mergers were completed Archbishop Eijk presented his plan to dismantle local faith communities.” (Quotation from a letter from a high ranking official in the diocese of Utrecht, who was closely involved with the merger process, in reaction to the letter of Archbishop Eijk, dated 23 November 2014.)

With regard to the procedure followed

As you well know, there is a specific procedure that is to be followed when a church is closed and sold, and stops being a sacred edifice and given over into profane but not sordid use. This procedure was made by the Diocese of Utrecht, in accordance with episcopal law. The Bishop must account for his decision both procedurally and with regard to the content according to canonical law. There have been mistakes and inaccuracies in the procedure followed by the parish council and we wish to bring them to the attention of the Congregation for the Clergy in the appeal procedure:

- In 2012 the location council received a letter from the parish council, in which the council informed us of the decision to put the church on the market (to be sold) and of the intention to withdraw the church building from its status as a sacred edifice. A meeting on that topic was

organised. At no time was it stated that this was to be a formal hearing. Only afterwards was it deemed a hearing by the parish council.

- Step 5 of the procedure entails hearings for the parishioners of the specific location. A draft plan that the parish council must draw up as a formal step in the procedure must be presented and explained. In the location of Brummen, a hearing was organised on 23 September 2014, for all parishioners. That evening no plan was presented or explained either orally or in writing. The minutes of the hearing reflect that no plan, draft or otherwise, was presented.
- The parish council, by giving such a short notice to the official hearing of 23 September 2014 – the hearing was announced a week after the meeting of 2 September 2014 – did not give the parishioners a reasonable opportunity to react to the closure and selling of our church.

We offered to clarify our initial appeal against the decree in a conversation with Archbishop Eijk and discuss the matter with him. Unfortunately, the Archbishop did not seize the opportunity.

We look forward to your reaction, in the faith that you care about our faith community, and that you will support us and rule in our favour.

Copies of this letter are being sent to the nuntius and Archbishop Eijk.

Asking the blessing of Your Eminence,
We are,
Yours respectfully in Christ,

Name

Address

Signature