

Archbishop's pricey retirement home spurs giving backlash

by [Mark Mueller](#)

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) Every year, without fail, Joe Ferri writes a \$100 check to the Archdiocese of Newark for the Archbishop's Annual Appeal, a fundraising drive that benefits a variety of religious causes.

This year, Ferri left the empty envelope on his pew at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Bloomfield. He's done writing checks.

"If this is the only way I can be heard, so be it," said Ferri, 70. "I'm disgusted. The archdiocese is not going to get another penny out of me."

Two weeks after The Star-Ledger disclosed that Archbishop John J. Myers is building a 3,000-square-foot addition on the expansive home where he will spend his retirement, it appears the work will cost the archdiocese far more than the \$500,000 allotted for construction.

Parishioners, infuriated by what they call a tone-deaf show of excess at a time when Catholic schools are closing and when the pope has called on bishops to shed the trappings of luxury, say they're cutting off contributions entirely or sharply curtailing them.

Others said they will continue supporting their local parishes but will ignore the annual appeal, which has been heavily promoted in churches over the past month across the archdiocese, home to 1.3 million Catholics in the New Jersey counties of Essex, Hudson, Union and Bergen.

At stake are millions of dollars that support schools, youth ministries, retired priests and Catholic Charities, the nonprofit agency that runs homeless shelters and

provides a wide array of services for the poorest residents. In recent years, the appeal has brought in between \$10 million and \$11 million annually, said Jim Goodness, a spokesman for Myers.

While acknowledging the good work the church does, the parishioners said they believe their complaints will be ignored if they don't make the point more indelibly with their pocketbooks.

"The only language the church understands is money," said Maria Bozza, 69, who has urged fellow parishioners at Holy Family Church in Nutley to withhold contributions to the archdiocese. "We need to start an 'empty envelope month' to replace the archbishop's annual appeal. If parishioners in every church in the Newark Archdiocese sent in an empty envelope, then they will get the message."

The Rev. John Bambrick, pastor of a parish in the Diocese of Trenton, and an occasional critic of Myers' leadership, said he understands parishioners' frustration. Many priests share it, he said, but are unwilling to speak out publicly.

"The average priest lives in two rooms with a bathroom, and the pope lives in a hotel room," Bambrick said, a reference to Pope Francis' decision to live in a guest house instead of the papal palace. "I don't understand why a 75-year-old man needs a 7,500-square-foot mansion with two swimming pools."

Parishioners, Bambrick said, are now faced with a dilemma. By refusing to donate, he said, they are most certainly sending a message. But they're also depriving the neediest residents of care, he said.

"It does hurt the poor," Bambrick said. "As priests, that's the hardest thing for us. It doesn't hurt the archbishop. There's no way to hold him accountable. But the poor are held accountable for his bad decisions."

In church last Sunday and in parish bulletins, some pastors forcefully pushed back against the notion Myers had done anything wrong, exhorting parishioners to continue giving and characterizing coverage of the renovation by The Star-Ledger and other news outlets as anti-Catholic.

"For the love of God, the media is our devil," the Rev. Peter Palmisano, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Virgin Church in Garfield, wrote in the Feb. 28 bulletin. "DO NOT LET OPINIONS stand in the way of us doing God's work, living the Gospel and helping the

archbishop do the same.”

The Hunterdon County home—situated on 8.2 wooded acres in the Diocese of Metuchen—has five bedrooms, three full bathrooms, a three-car garage and a basement office, according to documents on file in the municipal building.

An elevator was installed in 2011 at a cost of about \$35,000, the records show. A large, kidney-shaped swimming pool sits behind the structure. The house was assessed last year at \$776,000, with taxes of nearly \$19,000.

The archdiocese, a tax-exempt organization, has paid the property tax each year because the house is not primarily used for religious functions, said Goodness.

The three-story addition, now under construction, will add 3,000 square feet and will include a bedroom with a sitting area, a large study with an attached library, a full-floor “gallery” on the third level, two bathrooms, three fireplaces and its own elevator.

A “wellness room” will contain a 14-foot by 7-foot exercise pool and an adjoining whirlpool tub, identified on blueprints as a hot tub.

Goodness said the addition’s cost will be borne by the sale of other properties, chiefly a Connecticut house once used by retired Archbishop Peter Gerety.

Donors also have contributed to the renovation, Goodness said, but he has declined to say how much the restricted donations amount to.

Under no circumstances, he said, will funds from the annual appeal be used for the construction or for ancillary costs, such as furnishing the home or landscaping work.

In a lengthy statement Friday, the spokesman urged parishioners to support the fundraising drive, saying it “all goes to people in need.” More than 50 percent of contributions—or more than \$5 million—is earmarked for Catholic schools, he said. Another \$3 million goes to Catholic Charities, he said. About \$1 million is shared with parishes that meet or exceed fundraising goals.

“It’s painful to hear some people talking about stopping their contributions to the annual appeal and to the church in general,” Goodness, wrote. “By withdrawing their support, who are they harming? The very people that we as a church are pledged to help.”

Kevin Davitt, 59, of Glen Rock refused to put his money in the collection basket this past Sunday.

And while he had already donated to the archbishop's annual appeal—he said it was a “significant sum”—Davitt won't do so again unless Myers reimburses the archdiocese or fully funds the construction with private donations.

“This just adds insult to injury,” said Davitt, who worked as a spokesman for former Gov. James E. McGreevey from 2001 to 2003 and who now works for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York. “We're all still grappling with the problems of pedophilia and sexual inappropriateness of our priests, and then to have this come out of the blue is very discouraging to me as a Catholic.”

Last week, Davitt expressed his frustration in an email to Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States. Dozens of other parishioners said they had likewise written to the ambassador, known as the nuncio, or to Pope Francis at the Vatican.

“I am hopeful you might be able to communicate to our Holy Father the need to remove the archbishop from his position in Newark,” Davitt wrote.