

## **OUR SACRED OBJECTS**

When I was pastor of Saint Hyacinth Parish in Bay City, Michigan, I recall a deli in the neighborhood called “Casa Vinny’s.” The deli was famous for the fact that Vinny had it full of life size statues of saints, after whom he named various sandwiches. Some thought it rather sacrilegious to have saints associated with their food. However, Vinny thought that he was doing a good thing. Apparently, the statues were no longer needed in places of worship, and he could not see them simply retired.

But, then, he also thought it was a good thing to send a packet of Michigan navy beans, which he called “Peace Beans,” to various heads of state throughout the world. That included President John Kennedy. Vinny would actually receive photos and letters of thanks for his kind gesture. With these, he plastered the walls of his deli.

The saints represented by the statues may have actually gotten more attention at the deli than they did in a church. A passage from Sacred Scripture appears to apply to Vinny.

“For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” [Luke 16:8].

Of course, I am not advocating this type of use for our religious symbols. The Associated Press recently ran an article about religious artifacts “migrating” to unusual places, as America’s shifting population leaves churches empty. Those unusual places include restaurants, bars, casinos, antique shops, as well as private homes. At the same time, more and more dioceses are making efforts to insure that an inappropriate “migration” does not take place.

I want to assure the Faithful of our Diocesan Church that the latter is true in our case. When a church building is no longer needed due to dwindling membership, we strive to remove as many religious symbols as possible. This often includes the stained glass windows. These are, then, offered to other churches in our area or in the missions. That way, the purpose of those who donated them in the first place continues to be fulfilled. What will often happen is that certain religious articles are solemnly brought from the closed church to the remaining church of worship, beautifully symbolizing the merger of the two faith communities.

A particular challenge is the church building, itself. It, too, is symbolic of our faith and traditions that fostered that faith. Sometimes, the church building can be sold to another Christian tradition, so that the Lord continues to be praised in a place originally built for that purpose. When I recall that the first Mass was the Last Supper and the Eucharist was celebrated within the context of a meal in the early years of the Church, I do not mind seeing a church building become a restaurant.

It is next to impossible to control the usage of a building after it is sold. That is why some advocate the demolition of church buildings rather than selling them. After all, we do bury human bodies whose life has ended. Perhaps, we should bury buildings of worship, as well.

Vinny was shrewd, but not disrespectful. I am sure that he was able to name every saint in his deli. Are you able to name every saint whose memory is venerated by a statue or other representation in your church, without first having to take a tour?