

Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC*HS Bishop of Motherwell

9th August 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am aware that in recent days there have been strong reactions among some people to the decision of the Motherwell Diocesan Trustees to close the Pilgrimage Centre at Carfin at the end of September. I hope therefore that some more explanation of our decision may be helpful.

There two distinct entities in the Church's grounds at Carfin. First of all the Parish of St Francis Xavier, which includes the Parish Church and House, the Grotto, the Xavier Centre and other buildings. Secondly there is the Pilgrimage Centre, built in the 1990's and owned by the Diocese. The closure decision refers only to the Pilgrimage Centre, which has been run as a Limited Company with its own Board of Directors. The Centre was always expected to operate as a business and to generate enough income to cover its costs and hopefully, some profits which could be put back into the enterprise, particularly the maintenance of the building. It has not succeeded in doing this for many years and has instead, depended on loans from the Diocese, and support from the parish, to continue trading. It is a business that is not making money, shows no signs of doing so and costs the Diocese a substantial amount of money.

Since I became Bishop of the Diocese five years ago there have been discussions at Board level, at the Diocesan Finance Committee and at the Trustees Meeting about the future viability of the Centre. Throughout this time, I allowed it to continue to operate at a loss, as it has provided a welcome service for pilgrims to the grotto and employment for a number of staff. After commissioning a feasibility study earlier this year we decided that there was no justification for keeping a loss-making company trading indefinitely and the process should begin to inform the staff of the closure and to ensure they receive all that they entitled to when being made redundant. That is why it was necessary last week to announce the closure of the Centre. For the staff especially this is a sad moment and I thank them for their commitment and hard work over many years. I thank also those who have served as directors, especially at this difficult time.

The ultimate difficulty for the Centre is that not enough people visit the Grotto. Far more pilgrims would be needed to maintain the present business and improve the facilities. It does not seem likely that more people will come to the Grotto, even though it is a beautiful oasis of prayer and tranquillity. This summer only 20 of the parishes in our Diocese have arranged a Parish Day at the Grotto. That is a third of the parishes and is sadly indicative of the decline in numbers. If the support is not there from the local community it is unlikely that visitors from further afield will compensate for this. It is true that large numbers come to Carfin for special feast-days and devotions, but they often visit in the evening when the Pilgrimage Centre is closed and the Xavier Centre is more able to cope with a large number looking for a cup of tea after Mass.

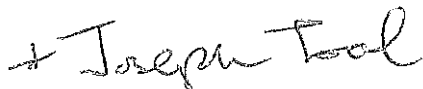
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I accept people may feel disappointed about this decision but they have to be aware that we are now a Diocese of modest means, which can't afford to ignore the reality of the limited resources we can invest in a business that is not financially viable. The total income of the Diocese, in the last financial year was £11 million as was our expenditure. We basically spend everything we take in, leaving us unable to save for the future. That is the reality of where we are now and parishioners need to be aware that there no surplus funds that can be accessed to pay for short-falls in income. We have been left with no option, but to make a difficult choice in regard to the Pilgrimage Centre. Unfortunately, it will not be the only one we must make, as we face a future of reduced numbers and modest incomes. As a Diocese with more limited financial resources than in the past, we must cut our coat according to our cloth.

With my prayers and good wishes.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Joseph Toal". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

+ Joseph Toal

