

28 April 2008

Dear Metropolitan Paul Saliba,

RE: PLANS FOR ST PAULS CHURCH

I write to you to express my opinion and that of many of the congregation about the suggestion of acquiring land and building another church with a school & child care centre.

Your eminence, I understand that you have a very strong ambition to increase the number of churches within the Asia Pacific region and also to build other valuable community structures to serve the community. This is a very noble aim however I am compelled to express to you the immense spiritual and social cost on the congregation as a result of the pressure imposed on the committee to constantly raise funds.

I have been a member of the St Pauls parish since its inception at the Uniting Church in Wheelers hill where it was lead by Fr Geoff. When the decision was made to acquire the property in Plunkett road, the current location of St Pauls Church, the parish took on a massive financial responsibility. For a congregation as young as ours it was like a child maturing before his time. We bore the burden gladly and succeeded in repaying the loan. However, the culture of the church has changed over the last four years away from the spiritual end of the spectrum to an aggressive financial agenda.

The financial agenda is one which the congregation feels has been imposed on us from the Archdiocese. Fr George has worked tirelessly to gather the lost flock, all while running a business to maintain his abode. I fear that Fr George will not be able to leave his business and continue with his commitments to the church because of the financial pressure on our parish. I'm sure he feels awkward about asking the committee for a stipend because of the work needed at St Pauls if we take on this new project.

Furthermore, the archdiocese fundraising function held at St Paul's last year which you had attended during lent has set a detrimental precedent towards the spiritual development of the congregation. It has left many feeling divided and confused about the role of the Church. Most recently, a concert was held during the great fast immediately following the Vespers on Friday the 11th of April which mirrored the party of the archdiocese the preceding year. At this concert there was an abundance of alcohol and the serving of non fasting food. I realise that our faith is not one which is imposed on others but where individuals freely choose to take up their cross and walk the path less travelled, the church should be setting the ultimate example. If his eminence allowed and attended a party the preceding year during lent, who is father George to prevent this one?

Another issue which has weighed heavily on me is the inability of many ladies to attend the liturgy every Sunday. The Ladies committee have worked tirelessly to raise money to repay the debts but the cost is their spiritual development. The ladies preparing falafel or other food to be sold after the liturgy miss out on the entire liturgy. What spiritual nourishment are they receiving if they do not hear the word from the Gospel; the teachings of the holy fathers through the priests sermon, and more importantly, the body & blood of Christ. Are we to be a franchise with the sole aim of gathering the flock only for their pennies or are we bringing together the lost sheep of The Lord?

As you are aware we have a problem with youth attendance to the Liturgy. I regret that many of my peers prefer to socialise outside the church rather than to partake in the liturgy. Some only join the congregation for Holy Communion and then leave to join their friends again. This is a problem that can only be corrected when the example is set by the parents and church leaders. What would you expect when their parents are not attending the liturgy due to fundraising commitments?

Forgive me if my thoughts sound harsh but what I observe is in conflict with what I am learning about Orthodox Christianity.

In conclusion I put forward the following thoughts. Please allow the congregation to take a breath from the past four years of financial stress. Please allow the parish priest to merge fully into the spiritual life by giving him the opportunity to leave his business and focus fully on the congregation. Please allow the members of the ladies committee to enjoy the Sunday liturgy without the stress of wondering whether they will have time to cook enough food for fundraising, week in week out. Your eminence, your spiritual leadership in this matter is pertinent to ensuring the future of the youth and the spiritual nourishment of the congregation. This aggressive financial agenda of the archdiocese needs to halt.

I await your reply.

Yours in Christ,

JOSEPH MATTAR