

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROLF PEDERSEN

I am a lay, life-professed member and East Canada chaplain of the Third Order, (Anglican) Society of St. Francis, Province of the Americas.

I also was, until two years ago, Editorial Page Editor of the Guelph Mercury.

As an Anglo-Lutheran Franciscan, I have asked myself what makes the Ignatius Jesuit centre and its property so special to me, a Guelphite of almost 16 years. Why do I, a non-Catholic, almost instinctively want to defend it against forces that would threaten to diminish its value as a quiet place of retreat?

Its buildings are not architectural gems by today's standards. Unlike the great European cathedrals, they are not masterpieces of craftsmanship, combining utility and art. Even the Jesuit community, whose property it is, has over time changed to the point at which the place is no longer needed as a noviciate -- a centre for the training and education of men aspiring to join this historic English-speaking branch of the Jesuits in Canada.

Yet defend it I will and must. Both my Anglican and Lutheran faith traditions (yes, I formally belong to both) recognize the wisdom and necessity of setting aside spaces of worship -- lands and buildings -- and to protect them and their environments for public use. Such lands and buildings are specially consecrated (made holy, if you like) by the common consensus of people, usually ordinary, disinterested people, who, as a group, choose to acknowledge that there is something extraordinary, something special about it

that is not quite as obvious in other places. The specialness of these places is often, but not always, acknowledged by formal ceremonies, rituals and charters.

From my Anglican background, Glastonbury and Malmesbury Abbeys in England stand out as present, living examples of sacred places.

Glastonbury is the 36 acre site of the ruins of a Benedictine monastery founded prior to the 10th century. The land itself was worthless Somerset marsh until the monks drained it, farmed it and quarried stone to build themselves a church and houses for the town that would spring up around it. The first abbot of Glastonbury Abbey, St. Dunstan, eventually became Archbishop of Canterbury.

It was as humble and risky a beginning as the Jesuits experienced some 90 plus years ago, when Guelph wasn't even on most maps. Over the centuries, Glastonbury (like the Jesuit Centre) had its ups and downs, its good periods and its lean periods. In 1066, it was utterly destroyed by Norman invaders, then rebuilt by Norman Benedictines who re-recognized the site as consecrated land. In 1184 the Norman church was destroyed by fire. A new church was completed in 1213. It remained and prospered to become the second largest abbey in England. A special apartment within the abbey was constructed for King Henry VII's occasional visits. But in 1536, Henry VII's successor, Henry VIII, summarily ordered the nation's monasteries dissolved. Some 10,000 English monks and nuns were forced to disband and fend for themselves as best they could.

Henry had reasons for his actions, some unjustified, most not. But for Glastonbury, it was the sudden end of an era. The abbot was hanged and the abbey destroyed. Today, the town remains. The ruins are still carefully preserved and the grounds maintained. Tens of thousands of people, pilgrims and/or tourists, visit the place each year, drawn by the inspiring notion that the ruins of the church and cloisters still hold traces of some intensely and objective numinous presence transmitted to them by generations of prayers from devout worshippers. It is supposed to be the site of the mystical land of Avalon and the grave site of the legendary King Arthur and his Queen, Guinivere.

Five years ago, my wife and I, on a trip to England, stumbled on the ancient abbey at Malmesbury. It was originally built around 800 CE on a barren plain for reasons that probably make no sense to the modern mind. It flourished and a city sprang up around it both to serve it and to be served by it. It was restored in the mid 14th century, but then after 800 years of exposure to the English elements, it began to fall apart. First, the spire and central tower fell, destroying the east wing. In 1662, the west wing crumbled. But like other monastic houses, it had been dissolved and the monks who lived, toiled and worshipped there were either killed or forced out. Yet the abbey remains, partly ruined, partly usable. Since 1536 the large usable portion has been in regular service as an English parish church. The grounds, the gardens and many artefacts are meticulously maintained as a kind of public museum in the middle of the city. It remains an important and awe-inspiring centre of worship (and a tourist destination). In many ways it continues to set the cultural, commercial and industrial tone for the city.

I will mention one other sacred space before dealing directly with the Ignatius Centre for Spirituality and that is Wittenberg, Germany. It was the home of Martin Luther, the reformer. Wittenberg is a smallish, indelible city of 50,000 on the Elb River. Luther lived there as an Augustinian monk. Later, as a prominent leader of the Protestant Reformation, he was given the deserted monastery as a place to live and work. With his wife, Katie, he raised a family and carried on his work as a theologian and teacher at the University of Wittenberg. Today, the monastery is preserved and venerated as a museum to Luther's memory and his reforms but on the grounds is a modern seminary for the training of Lutheran clergy. Few Wittenberg citizens would regard the conservation and preservation of this and other historic sites as trivial matters.

The property now owned and maintained by the Society of Jesus in Guelph is admittedly not in the same age league as the properties in Glastonbury, Malmesbury or Wittenberg. It is set in Canada and both our history and theologies are different and arguably less mature. But the property is no less important at this critical time. It is undeniable that the Jesuits were instrumental in the European settlement of this country, in the relationships between European invaders and Aboriginal peoples and in the founding of Guelph.

The real value of the Ignatius Centre, from my perspective, is not as a purveyor and developer of Roman Catholic doctrine -- though it certainly has played that role and I highly respect that ongoing contribution to Christian thought. But as I quickly discovered when I moved to Guelph with my wife Carol in 1990, the grounds, the buildings and the programs are open to people of all faiths -- or of no discernible faiths at all.

For two years, Rev. Philip Shano, SJ, was my spiritual director. I met with him at infrequent intervals at my request and we chatted, helpfully I thought, about problems and issues I was experiencing in my work life as a daily newspaper editor, my family life and my church and prayer life. Fr. Shano remained my spiritual director until his reassignment to India.

I have, of course, retained some crucial memories of our talks. More important, I have retained my ability to work effectively as a writer and editor and as a public commentator. He listened attentively and graciously and on a couple of occasions suggested some Ignatian meditation exercises, which I still value and practice.

My attachment to the place has continued. I visit the property to walk the trails in summer. For two years now I have made regular summer and autumn use of the outdoor labyrinth, a meditative pattern mown in the tall grass. I have been part of peace conferences and several strategy meetings there and several years ago I met daily for a week with a partner in a week of guided prayer exercise. I am continually surprised and heartened by the breadth and depth of the Centre's ecumenism -- and by the numbers and diversity of people whose lives have been touched by it. .

As important as my own experiences was my wife Carol's three-day retreat, week long retreats by two members of my own Third Order of the Society of St. Francis (Anglican) and by clergy and laity of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.

Naturally I cannot testify to the inner benefits these individuals may or may not have received from their stays there, but something drew them to the place. That intangible, indefinable something was the expectation of an experience of the divine. None of my acquaintances, to my knowledge, has ever had their expectations disappointed. This alone surely defines the Ignatius Centre as a sacred space. That a significantly large ecumenical assembly of individuals comprising a cross-section of faith groups in Guelph would freely gather to publicly offer their perspectives as witnesses is highly significant, not to say highly unusual.

Though it has costs to cover, the Ignatius Centre does not seek to make customers of any of us. It does not aggressively promote its services. It does not seek converts. It offers quiet, anonymity, an ecologically friendly environment and a welcome acceptance to all who value these life-enhancing qualities. It offers organic garden plots to local citizens for their own use.

Any economic advantages that might accrue to this city and this region through a regional commercial complex in close proximity to this spiritual centre would be greatly offset by the destructive impact to this unique sacred site and spiritual centre. It thrives on the quiet apartness that seems to be becoming increasingly rare, though in increasing demand, in southern Ontario. A regional commercial centre with attendant increases in truck and car traffic is completely at odds with the character of the historic and evolving mission of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre.

Places like this are simply irreplaceable. Their sacred environments are not to be further encroached upon.