

Preservationists seek to acquire beloved Hollywood monastery

by [Alejandra Molina](#) in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue



The Monastery of Angels, founded in 1924, is home to a small community of cloistered Dominican nuns. (RNS photo by Alejandra Molina)

Fearing the Monastery of the Angels could be sold for private use or redevelopment, Los Angeles preservationists and advocates are forming a nonprofit as they seek to acquire and take responsibility for the beloved Hollywood home to cloistered Dominican nuns.

Over the years, the community has been dwindling as the nuns have aged and some have died from COVID-19 and other causes, making it difficult to sustain the monastery's way of life. The Dominicans have devoted themselves to studying

scripture and to praying for those who come to them for guidance and penance.

An online petition to save the monastery emerged last year, with LA residents referring to the four-acre property as a “retreat” and an “oasis” amid the clamor of the city. It has garnered more than 4,300 signatures as of May 25.

Local prioress Maria Christine—president of the North American Association of Dominican Monasteries—said in December that no decision had been made to sell, adding that the Dominicans were “looking at many options and trying to find the best suitable resolution.”

One of those options included seeking other religious communities who could manage the monastery. “We continue to wait for the official canonical permissions in order to proceed. Our goal is to retain the beauty of the property and continue to be a source of spiritual enrichment for all who come to pray,” she said in an email.

“The world needs prayer and we keep everyone in our prayer intentions,” she added.

But preservationists aren’t taking any chances.

The Monastery of the Angels Foundation of Los Angeles, which is in the process of incorporating as a nonprofit, wants to acquire the monastery to care for and maintain the property “as a Catholic sacred space,” according to the Save the Monastery of the Angels website.

“Losing the monastery to non-Catholic redevelopment will both deprive Catholics in Los Angeles of the ability to take spiritual nourishment from its grounds and also remove a place of prayer from a community that badly needs it,” according to the website.

Behind that effort are Kim Cooper and Richard Schave, LA historians and preservationists who run a tour company exploring the city through an architectural, historical, and spiritual lens; Rob Hollman, a nonprofit consultant whose clients have included PBS SoCal, Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation, and Preserve Orange County; and Brody Hale, president of the St. Stephen Protomartyr Project, an organization that works to preserve historic Catholic churches and sacred spaces.

“We need to be proactive,” Schave said.

Schave said he agrees with Maria Christine that the monastery should remain a space for spiritual enrichment, but “if we just let this go and put our faith in the Dominican Federation and the Holy See,” he said, “I do not believe we will achieve that goal.”

That part of town, Cooper said, has been subjected to overseas investors who “don’t really have a sense of community.”

“They just want to do as much as they can as quickly as they can, in order to profit,” Cooper said.

Founded in 1924 by a New Jersey nun, the Monastery of the Angels has received financial support from wealthy LA families and celebrities, such as the Dohenys, through the Carrie Estelle Doheny Foundation, and the actress Jane Wyman, through the Jane Wyman Charitable Foundation.

The nuns also bake and sell their famous pumpkin bread, peanut brittle, chocolate mints, and other treats.

Advocates behind this effort plan a fundraising campaign aimed at Catholics and others in the area and across the nation. They will determine whether it makes financial sense to continue producing the pumpkin bread and other goods.

“Any income derived from the production of these goods will be solely spent on the care and upkeep of the monastery and its grounds,” they said.

They’ll also seek to retain the gift shop and explore the possibility of making the monastery available for retreats.

Even though Dominican nuns would no longer inhabit the monastery under their stewardship, the group envisions keeping the chapel open for the occasional celebration of mass, 24-hour eucharistic adoration, other sacramental activities, and private prayer. Volunteers would be on hand.

There appear to be fewer than five nuns residing at the monastery.

The group is modeling its effort after other lay Catholics who have taken ownership of and responsibility for churches and monasteries across the country.

One example is Save Our St. Anne's, a group that for years has maintained St. Anne's Church in Columbia, California. Mass is celebrated there a few times a year.

In Batesville, Indiana, St. Mary's of the Rock Preservation Society has been caring for St. Mary's of the Rock Church since its closing in 2013.

"Those who wanted St. Mary's to remain a church available for occasional masses stepped forward and took on the responsibility of caring for it and its grounds, at their own expense," the group said. —Religion News Service