

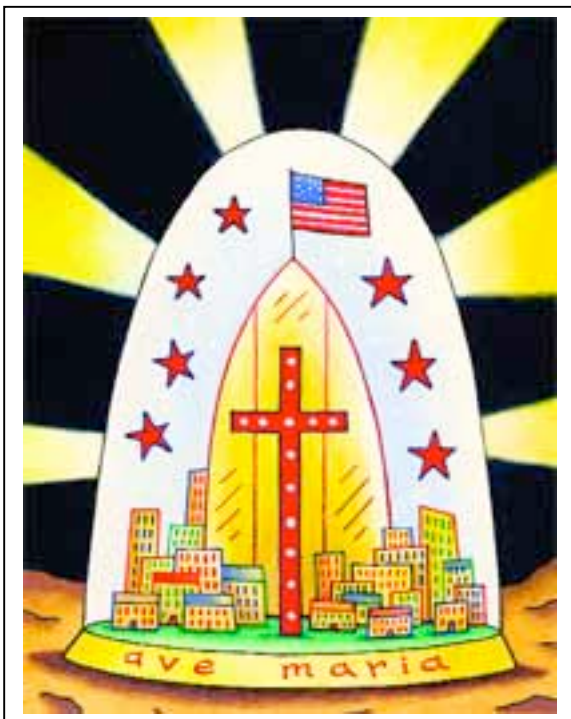
IN A WORLD OF ITS OWN: The Domino's Pizza billionaire Tom Monaghan is funding the construction of a Catholic town in Florida. A list of Ave Maria's backers reads like a Who's Who of conservative Catholics. Liberals fear a ghetto.
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In a world of its own

David Gibson



The Domino's Pizza billionaire Tom Monaghan is funding the construction of a Catholic town in Florida. A list of Ave Maria's backers reads like a Who's Who of conservative Catholics. Liberals fear a ghetto

America has always been the preferred destination for people hoping to reinvent themselves, from seventeenth-century Puritans looking to build a "City upon a Hill" to today's economic migrants seeking a chance in the lottery that is the American marketplace. But when Americans want to reinvent themselves, they go to Florida.

Little wonder, since the state itself can seem like nothing so much as a giant reclamation project. For more than a century developers have been draining the peninsula's sea-level swamps to build theme parks, carving man-made waterways for pleasure boaters, and rebuilding the state's beaches for sunbathers after the hurricanes that sweep in like clockwork every autumn. Florida is a testament to the American conviction that the mere forces of nature should not deter Man from carving out a Paradise - or its Disney World simulacrum - from any place with enough sunshine to allow golf to be played year-

round.

So it should be no surprise that when Tom Monaghan, the ultra-conservative Catholic billionaire who made his fortune in takeaway pizza, wanted to recreate the Catholic world of his youth, he chose a scrubby 5,000-acre tomato field in south-west Florida as the place to do it. Monaghan's dream is to build, from scratch, an entire, self-contained Catholic town called Ave Maria that will incorporate a university of the same name, the first Catholic university to be built in the United States in more than four decades.

With some \$400 million in seed money from Monaghan, ground was broken for the project in February, with construction steaming ahead this summer and occupancy to begin by next year. By autumn 2007 Ave Maria University (AMU) is to be in full swing, with the goal of attracting 5,000 students. Ave Maria Town will have 25,000 residents living in 11,000 townhouses, retirement homes and single-family units, all surrounding a 100-foot tall church, and a crucifix in front that, at 65 feet high, will be the largest in the country.

That's just for starters. The 68-year-old Monaghan has vowed to keep his Catholic town a scrupulous preserve of conservative values and church practices through a series of measures that have provoked consternation among the secular world, but also from more than a few Catholics. The first red flag was Monaghan's declaration in 2004 that because he and his partners would own all commercial real estate in Ave Maria Town, they "will be able to control what goes on there". That control included barring pornographic magazines, limiting cable television access to approved channels, and banning the sale of contraceptives.

Those comments, and his statement that all residents would have to live in accordance with church teachings, fed a growing perception that Ave Maria Town would be a "Catholics-only" community, which led civil libertarians to threaten legal challenges if such measures were enacted. In March of this year Monaghan and his partner, Paul Marinelli, whose development company Baron Collier is doing the actual construction, issued a statement saying that their new town would not "enforce" restrictions on the sale of contraceptives or racy magazines. However, Monaghan subsequently told *Our Sunday Visitor* that he believes lease conditions and "informal understandings" with residents would achieve the same goals. And while saying that Ave Maria would be "open to everybody", he said that given the orientation of the planned community, and judging by the more than 20,000 enquiries they have received already, Ave Maria will surely be an enclave of what he called "strong Catholics".

In a speech to business leaders in June sponsored by the Archdiocese of Denver, Monaghan seemed to bolster his original command-and-control vision even further. "We control 50 per cent of the development," he said. "Our plan is that no adult material will appear on the town's cable system and the pharmacy will not sell contraceptives." Florida's attorney general said he sees no legal obstacles to the project, and since the state's governor is Jeb Bush, brother of the President and a convert to Catholicism who heaped praise on Ave Maria at the February groundbreaking, it is improbable that Monaghan will face too many hurdles. Not that opponents would dissuade Monaghan. "Bring 'em on," the former marine told the Denver businessmen.

So where does Ave Maria fit in the larger dynamic of American Catholicism? Is it the product of one man's idiosyncracies or the wave of the future? Monaghan and his allies often portray their community as a lifeboat of orthodox Catholicism on the rough seas of moral relativism, preserving the true faith from a godless world and from Catholics who do not share their vision of the Church. "There are not many out there who are really authentic Catholics," Monaghan said in 2004. At other times he takes a more assertive posture, seeing Ave Maria as a citadel from which Monaghan's troops will sally forth to re-convert America. "I believe all of history is just one big battle between good and evil," Monaghan told *Newsweek* last February. "I don't want to be on the sidelines."

It is unlikely that Monaghan will ever be on the sidelines. Not only does he have lots of money and the drive born of deprivation - he was raised by nuns in an orphanage and started Domino's Pizza from a \$500 investment - but he also has the connections to ensure that Ave Maria and the ideology behind it will resonate in the Church's corridors of powers. Indeed, for more than a decade before his Florida venture, Monaghan had been building an influential network of Catholic conservatism by bankrolling think tanks, periodicals and an intelligentsia to do battle with liberals in the public square. Thus it was not unusual, for example, to see colourful adverts for Domino's Pizza bolstering the beige pages of Fr Richard John Neuhaus' journal *First Things*.

But Monaghan's most ambitious project was born in 1998 when he started Ave Maria College, siting it in his native Michigan near the town of Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan. The college, which will be shut down after the coming school year and its remaining students and resources sent to the new Florida university, did reasonably well. But it was the Ave Maria School of Law, which Monaghan started in 2000, that showed the greatest promise as a breeder reactor for militant Catholic orthodoxy. The law school regularly drew conservative Catholic luminaries like Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, and Republican senator (and recent Catholic convert) Sam Brownback, to give lectures. And in September 2005, after just five years in existence, the school was granted full accreditation by the American Bar Association, and its students passed the bar exam at a remarkable rate, 88 per cent. Equipped with their degrees and a deep sense of mission, the law school graduates fanned out around the country to fulfil Monaghan's plan to fight "abortion, foetal research, cloning, same-sex 'marriage', moral relativism and world terrorism".

What Monaghan could not do, however, was to convince local officials in Michigan to approve his plans for an ambitious expansion of Ave Maria's facilities. So in 2002, fed up with the struggle, Monaghan decided to

relocate the entire operation to the sunnier climes of south-west Florida, to a rural area about 30 miles west of Naples. The project's scope and appeal was such that Monaghan has continued to draw support.

In fact, backers of Ave Maria, both town and gown, read like a *Who's Who* of conservative church leaders. They include Vienna's Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and Australia's trenchantly right-wing Cardinal George Pell, who gave a speech in May to Legatus, an organisation of high-powered Catholic businessmen that Monaghan founded, in which Cardinal Pell sharply criticised the tenets of Islam and called concerns over global warming "a symptom of pagan emptiness". Two American cardinals, Adam Maida of Detroit and Edward Egan of New York, sit on the Ave Maria law school board while Monaghan recruited the doughty Franciscan polemicist, Fr Benedict Groeschel, to be on the AMU Board of Trustees. He hired the staunchly conservative Fr Matthew Lamb away from Boston College to head the new university's theology department, and Monaghan's longtime ally, the Jesuit Fr Joseph Fessio, serves as the university's provost and its strongest apologist.

Fr Fessio is also a key link to Rome. The Jesuit was a student of then Fr Joseph Ratzinger in the 1960s in Tübingen, and he has remained close to the man who is now Pope Benedict XVI. Fr Fessio is also the editor-in-chief of Ignatius Press, which publishes Benedict XVI's writings in English. When Fr Fessio saw Pope Benedict after his election, the first thing the new pontiff said was, "How's Ave Maria?"

Pope Benedict's interest in Ave Maria is understandable in light of his longstanding view that the survival of Catholicism is likely to come by way of small, faithful communities, "creative minorities" that at some future date could revitalise Western civilisation just as Christians did in the early centuries of the Church. AMU president, Nicholas J. Healy, went so far as to describe Ave Maria Town as a modern incarnation of the "City of God", invoking the Church Father who has been Pope Benedict's greatest inspiration.

Yet the history of Utopianism shows that such idealism can easily go awry, and in Monaghan's case his very successes may play a role in thwarting, or at least delaying, part of his grand plan for Ave Maria Town.

The problem is that the law school did not want to leave the Michigan home where it has put down roots and enjoyed so much success. That led to a struggle between Monaghan, who is chairman of the board, and many board members and Ave Maria alumni. The battle led to accusations that Monaghan was forcing recalcitrant members off the board (which seems likely to approve the move eventually), and to some nasty exchanges.

One Ave Maria faculty member dismissed the Florida community as a "Catholic Jonestown" referring to the place in northern Guyana where 913 followers of the cult leader Jim Jones committed mass suicide in 1978. An Ave Maria alum, Terence McKeegan, framed the issue more precisely when he told the *The Wall Street Journal* last November that students going to Ave Maria law school believed the mission was "to create attorneys who were well-versed in Catholic social teaching and the law, who would engage the world and not retreat from it".

"It sounds like this town and the university in Florida is going to be a self-contained little Catholic enclave," he said.

The arguments about Ave Maria Town would seem, then, to be another chapter in the ongoing drama of American Catholicism - and, increasingly, the dilemma of the wider Church - which centres on the question of whether to stand apart from society or to assimilate. The desire to be fully American has clearly gained the upper hand in the generation since the Second Vatican Council, as US Catholics left their ethnic enclaves and blue-collar status behind to become perhaps the most prosperous and well-educated laity the Church has known. Monaghan and his allies tend to focus on the ills those apparent gains have brought, and they hold up Ave Maria, Florida, as the antidote to the failings of modern Catholic Americanism.

But the paradox of Monaghan's plan to build a bastion of orthodoxy is that his impulse is in reality more American than it is Catholic. Since the days of the Puritans, Americans have regularly been drawn to the lure of Utopia, heading off to set up communities of like-minded believers, from the various millennial sects to the Mormons who tried to found their own nation-state in Utah at the end of the nineteenth century. Ave Maria Town even has a more recent (and cautionary) antecedent in the Heritage USA Christian theme park and residential complex that the disgraced televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker built to great acclaim, and early success, in the 1980s. The couple and the project soon fell victim to scandal.

More telling, however, is that Monaghan's vision of an ideal Catholic town in reality most resembles the exclusive, increasingly popular, gated suburban communities designed for well-to-do white-collar professionals with lots of time and disposable income - in other words, the kind of people that Catholics used to work for but never figured they would become. The median price of the Ave Maria residences is around \$500,000, and while the developers say that is less than the average price in nearby Naples, it is still far beyond the means of working-class Catholics.

Ave Maria is clearly appealing, but it is only accessible to a narrow and privileged class of people who would seem to have little in common with their forebears or traditional Catholic social teaching. It is, in other words, the incarnation of the American dream, rather than a reflection of traditional Catholicism. And this, in the end, may be the final irony of Ave Maria Town - that Tom Monaghan's campaign to create a Catholic "sign of contradiction" in modern America may wind up as the most visible example of the Church's accommodation of American culture.

David Gibson is a journalist who has covered the Vatican and the US Church for more than 20 years. His latest book, *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World*, is to be published in September by HarperSanFrancisco.