



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY PARISH (OIL CITY) INTO SAINT JOSEPH PARISH (OIL CITY)

History

A. Saint Joseph Parish

Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City was established in 1864 in response to the population growth resulting from the oil boom in the region. Following numerous years of significant parish growth, the current church was dedicated on June 26, 1894. In 1898, the territory of the parish was divided in half, with Saint Stephen Parish being erected on the south side of the Allegheny River and Saint Joseph Parish remaining on the north side. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish was erected in Oil City one year later, but this did not result in any additional loss of territory to Saint Joseph Parish, since Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish was erected as a personal parish for Polish-speaking Catholics and their descendents. In 1914, a mission church of Saint Joseph Parish, known as Help of Christians Chapel and intended specifically for the elderly and children of the Siverly area, was blessed. In 1922, that mission community was erected as a parish with territory taken from Saint Joseph Parish, and the chapel was raised to the dignity of a parish church. With the loss of that territory in Siverly to Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, Saint Joseph Parish achieved its present form.

B. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish

In the 1890's, a group of Polish-speaking Catholics in Oil City petitioned the Bishop of Erie for the creation of personal parish, and on April 3, 1899 Bishop John E. Fitmaurice erected Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish for them and their descendents. Although the parish itself had no territory, the parish church was located within the confines of Saint Joseph Parish on the north side of the Allegheny River, and was dedicated on September 3, 1899. The current church was built and solemnly blessed on January 7, 1907. Throughout the twentieth century, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish continued to serve the spiritual needs of Oil City area Catholics of Polish heritage.

Current Situation

The entire Oil City area has seen significant demographic changes, in which decades of growth and prosperity were followed by decades of population decline and economic challenges. The current population of Oil City itself is less than half of what it was in 1930, when all of the city's parishes were flourishing. There is no indication of any likelihood that the situation will reverse itself. This decline in the overall population, coupled with an ever-growing secularism and an aging population, has resulted in the fact that every parish in the Oil City area has seen a considerable decline in membership. Despite their own difficulties, however, the parishes engage in noteworthy social assistance and pastoral outreach to the people of the Oil City area. This is made possible in large part by the level of pastoral collaboration which has existed in recent years among the parishes.

Nonetheless, the long-term sustainability of five separate parishes in the area is no longer feasible, or even possible. This is certainly true concerning Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, which in 2015 numbered only 84 households, with an average Sunday Mass attendance of 58 persons. The parish has not had the care of a full-time pastor since the year 2000, after which time the pastors of Saint Joseph Parish have also served as the non-resident administrator or pastor of the parish. If the care of souls for Catholics of Polish heritage in Oil City is to continue, and if their spiritual patrimony is to be preserved, then another more sustainable means must be found for doing so.

In pursuit of that end, as a part of a comprehensive pastoral planning process involving extensive study, collaboration, and dialogue throughout the diocese, together with an analysis of objective data regarding demographic shifts and population trends for individual parishes, specific communities and regions, I brought the matter of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish before the Presbyteral Council on March 9, 2016. With the support of the Presbyteral Council, I announced on April 14, 2016 a preliminary plan to merge Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish into Saint Joseph Parish, thus returning the personal parish to the territorial parish from which it originated.

I specified a time period in which I would welcome feedback in response to this preliminary proposal. As a result, I received input and advice from the shared pastor of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph Parishes, from the parishioners themselves, from the Vicar Forane and the Vicar General, and from those responsible for overseeing the development of the pastoral plan. I shared the results of this feedback with the members of the Presbyteral Council. In light of the new information, I then asked the council members once again for their advice on the aforementioned proposal to merge Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish into Saint Joseph Parish, for which they expressed unanimous support on July 11, 2016.

All of the requirements of canons 50, 51, 127, 166, and 515 have been fulfilled.

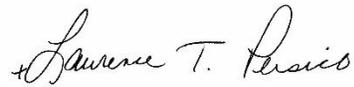
Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the need for a stronger and more sustainable means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish and to find a more sustainable means for preserving their Polish spiritual patrimony, while also considering the already diminished number of parishioners and the projected further decline of their number, the lack of available priests which renders it impossible to provide a full-time pastor for the parish, the relevant demographics of each parish in Oil City as well as projected future trends, the possibility of better stewardship in the shared use of temporal goods and personnel with Saint Joseph Parish, and the general plan of pastoral care not only for the Oil City area but also for the Diocese as a whole, I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Oil City shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Joseph Parish. It shall be territorial in nature, with the parish retaining all of the territory which it now possesses.
3. The pastoral care previously provided by the personal parish of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Catholics of Polish heritage in the Oil City area is henceforth to be provided instead by an apostolate assigned to Saint Joseph Parish. That apostolate is to foster the appropriate preservation and inclusion in the life of the parish of elements of the spiritual patrimony of the Polish culture, according to the prudent judgment of the pastor, as well as a welcoming spirit toward those who claim that patrimony as their own. In order to fulfill this apostolate, the priests assigned to Saint Joseph Parish are hereby given the same faculties for Venango County Catholics of Polish heritage as they have for the faithful who reside within the territory of the parish.
4. All sacramental records from Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Joseph Parish.
5. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish shall be transferred to Saint Joseph Parish.
6. The parish church shall be Saint Joseph church. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary church shall become a secondary church – without mission status – of Saint Joseph Parish.
7. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary church is to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214), but in accord with diocesan law, Masses are not to be celebrated there on Sundays or holy days of obligation or the evenings preceding them. As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary church every year on the solemnity of the

church's title, in accord with current liturgical norms (cf. cann. 1167 §2 and 1168 of the former Code of Canon Law, and can. 2 of the present Code). If such an observance is impeded by another date of higher rank according to the Roman calendar, the impeded solemnity is to be transferred to the first available date thereafter.

This decree is effective February 13, 2017, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 21st day of September, 2016



The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie



The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor