

July 22, 2019
Feast of St. Mary Magdalene

Dear Parishioners,

In 1859, Edwin Drake struck oil near Titusville. The resulting economic boom led to massive population growth in our region. Along with their families and their dreams for the future, many of the workers who flocked to this area brought with them their Catholic faith.

St. Joseph parish in Oil City was established in 1864 to meet the spiritual needs of these families, and by 1890 the congregation had outgrown its small frame church and began construction of the present St. Joseph church. By 1898, one parish was no longer sufficient to meet the spiritual needs of the population, and St. Stephen parish was established. In time, the number of Catholic parishes would swell to five.

These numerous parishes were clearly needed; in the 1950s, the parishes were performing approximately 320 baptisms per year!

But times have changed. Following the loss of major industry in Oil City, the population of the region as a whole – including the Catholic population – has greatly diminished. In 2018, only 14 baptisms were performed. This is a 96% decrease over a period of 68 years!

In 2017, in response to the changing demographic landscape and the changing needs of the Catholic community in Oil City, Bishop Persico enacted a pastoral plan which saw a contraction of the number of parishes from five to two. As part of this plan, the two remaining parishes began sharing a pastor and an office staff.

In the last two-and-a-half years, our two faith communities have grown closer and closer together. We have celebrated Mass together each week; we have grown together in faith through our new family-based intergenerational faith formation model; we have established a unified pastoral council to address the needs of our entire community. We have made new friends; we have celebrated new life together in baptism; we have mourned the passing of loved ones together at funerals. In time, more and more parishioners have begun to ask why the formal distinction between the two communities as independent parishes continues to exist.

During these past two-and-a-half years of growing together in the Lord, it has become apparent that our physical plants are in dire straits. The cost to repair and maintain even our main buildings is well beyond the capacity of our already stretched financial resources. In 2018, serious concerns were raised about the towers of St. Stephen church following the discovery of

debris in the parking lot. Consequently, the towers were temporarily stabilized. Recognizing that the extreme cost of repairs to just one portion of one building could financially cripple the community, the parish council recommended bringing in Building Systems Incorporated (BSI) of Erie as a consultant to evaluate the condition of our two parish churches. At the same time, we began compiling data regarding the demographic, financial, and sacramental realities of our parishes. Both the reports from BSI and the other data were staggering.

With all this information in hand, a 10-member ad hoc committee from both parishes was formed to develop a plan for the long-term vitality of the Catholic faith in the Oil City area. The plan on the next page is the result of their long and prayerful labors. This plan is not easy to read. Nevertheless, just as the painful experience of merging Assumption, Help of Christians, and St. Venantius has given birth to a more vibrant community, we believe that this plan is the best option for securing a future for the faith in Oil City so that just as we have received the faith from our ancestors, so too, future generations in Oil City might always know the name of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Fr. John L. Miller III
Pastor

Fr. Ian R. McElrath
Parochial Vicar

Preliminary Plan for Parishes & Facilities

With the encouragement of the Diocese, we have begun to look seriously at how we will prepare for our future as Catholics of the Oil City area. The following preliminary plan was formulated by a 10-member ad hoc committee¹ and is endorsed by the pastoral council and the pastor. This plan was devised in light of current realities impacting the Catholic faith community in Oil City including but not limited to: decreased Catholic population, decreased baptisms (96% drop since 1950), declining offertory, increasing age of parishioners (67% over 50), declining number of families (minus 500 families since 2010), and projected continued demographic decline. Furthermore, our facilities were built to service a large population that no longer exists and the cost to repair and maintain them is beyond the capacity of our current and projected-future resources. We believe this is the best plan to ensure the best possible care of souls in Oil City.

Phase I

1. Merge St. Stephen parish into St. Joseph Parish effective January 1, 2020.
2. Petition the Bishop to relegate St. Stephen Church to prepare for sale or demolition as soon as possible following the merger.
3. Utilize St. Stephen School, Assumption Social Hall, and/or the Knights of Columbus Hall for parish functions.
4. Consolidate parish offices at St. Joseph Rectory by July 1, 2020.
5. Demolish St. Stephen Rectory and reclaim land for use by St. Stephen School.
6. Complete necessary repairs and improvements (including parking) to St. Joseph Church to allow for exploration of viable long-term options for the life of the Catholic community in the region.
7. Reach out to neighboring parishes regarding collaboration for our future.

Phase II

Phase II planning will begin following the completion of Phase I. While Phase I is designed to stop the hemorrhaging of resources, Phase II will be about building the future rather than simply managing decline. Phase II planning will involve: developing the best possible structures for handing on the faith to future generations, building a financial safety net for the community, adapting to meet the needs of our parishioners and our community in a changing world, and placing a greater emphasis on the worship of God as the center of our lives as Catholics.

All parishioners are invited and encouraged to offer feedback to improve the plan. The feedback period will end **Monday, August 26th**. Options for giving feedback include:

- Letters submitted to the parish office
- Email submitted to feedback@oilcitycatholic.com
- Listening Sessions (Information Forthcoming)

After considering feedback, we anticipate the publication of the final plan during the week of September 9th.

¹ Composition of the 10 Member Ad Hoc Committee
4 members elected from pastoral council (2 members per parish)
2 members elected from finance councils (1 member per parish)
4 at-large members (2 members per parish)

