



DECREE

EFFECTING THE RELEGATION OF SAINT STEPHEN CHURCH (OIL CITY) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

History

A. Saint Joseph Parish

The oil boom during the 1860's in Venango County resulted in the establishment of Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City in 1864. The original parish church, soon outgrown, was replaced with the current church edifice which was dedicated on June 26, 1894. Shortly thereafter in 1898, the parish territory was divided by the Allegheny River to create the new Saint Stephen Parish. This action significantly reduced the geographic size of Saint Joseph Parish.

B. Saint Stephen Parish

As noted above, due to the rapid growth of the Catholic population in the Oil City area at the end of the nineteenth century, Saint Joseph Parish was divided into two separate parishes in 1898, with Saint Joseph Parish continuing to exist on the north side of the Allegheny River, while the newly formed Saint Stephen Parish received the territory south of the Allegheny River. The present Saint Stephen Church was dedicated in 1907. The structure, although renovated interiorly and rededicated in 1952, remains the same as that built in 1907. On January 1, 2020, Saint Stephen Parish was merged into Saint Joseph Parish with Saint Stephen church receiving the status of a secondary mission church. In the fall of 2023, the Saint Stephen church building was reduced to a secondary church without mission status (i.e. no Mass on Sundays, holy days or the evenings preceding them).

Current Situation

In August 2018, stones began to fall from the two steeple towers of Saint Stephen church. An inspection indicated that the towers needed emergency repair work to stabilize them. Temporary emergency measures were put in place to prevent other stones from dislodging. It became obvious, however, that major decisions would soon need to be made regarding the building's deteriorating condition.



From 2018 to the present, the Saint Stephen church building has continued to deteriorate, requiring extensive perimeter excavation to remedy drainage and mold problems, replacing the furnace, and additional stabilizing of the exterior stone of the building which had begun to fall to the ground. Various engineering and structural studies estimated a cost in excess of \$3.4 million to repair the building and make it safe and usable for the long term.

On January 19, 2024, Saint Joseph Parish received notice from the City of Oil City Director of Code Enforcement citing several severe violations of the City's building code statutes regarding Saint Stephen church building. The citation concluded: "At this time the church is a hazard, questionably safe and secure. It is an eyesore due to its blighted condition. Not only a blighted influence on the Southside neighborhood, it has been declared a public nuisance." The City citation directed to parish to engage the service of a structural engineer to present a plan for repairing the structure to make it safe and presentable.

The Law

According to the law, in order to relegate a church to profane use or even to close it permanently, it is necessary that there be some grave reason(s) suggesting that the church no longer be used for divine worship. Often the gravity of the cause becomes evident when a number of factors are considered together. Can. 1222 §2 states:

Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can relegate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church, and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby.

As a result of several decades of deferred maintenance, the condition of Saint Stephen church has deteriorated considerably. Since becoming pastor in 2017, the Reverend John L. Miller has overseen a number of major projects in an attempt to keep the Saint Stephen building safe and usable. Since 2021 these have included:

- New drainage system to halt basement social hall flooding and the growth of toxic mold
- Remediation of toxic mold already present in the basement social hall
- Replacing the failed steam boiler
- Repairs to the elevator to allow handicapped and elderly access to the church

These repairs cost the parish \$150,141.73 to complete. Even with these extraordinary repairs, the condition of the building has continued to worsen leading up to the City of Oil City's recent building code violation citation.

In June of 2023, Building Systems, Inc. of Erie, Pennsylvania, completed a thorough evaluation of the Saint Stephen Church building and provided an estimate of costs needed to stabilize the exterior of the building, and bring interior fixtures, lighting, plumbing, etc. up to a safe and sustainable condition. The estimated overall cost of these renovations is \$3.4 million.

At the end of the 2022-2023 fiscal year, Saint Joseph Parish reported total restricted assets of \$617,493.05. Total unrestricted assets were \$74,139.20. The parish is also paying on a historical \$165,000 loan.

In addition to Saint Stephen church, St. Joseph Parish is responsible for the maintenance of Saint Joseph church (the parochial church building), Saint Venantius secondary church, Saint Joseph Rectory, Saint Stephen School (housing PreK – 6 grade), two other buildings and three cemeteries.

In 2023, an extensive renovation of Saint Joseph church was completed rendering the building and worship space in excellent condition. This renovation project was fully underwritten by an anonymous donor. Saint Stephen church is 0.8 miles from Saint Joseph church.

Recognizing the dire condition of the Saint Stephen church building, and the financial impossibility to sufficiently repair the building, on November 30, 2023, and January 24, 2024, respectively, Father Miller, pastor, obtained the unanimous support of both the parish finance council and the parish pastoral council to petition that Saint Stephen church be relegated to profane but not sordid use. Being the only person who can legitimately claim rights concerning the church edifice, Father Miller has given his consent (cf. can. 1222 §2). In his letter to Bishop Persico dated February 16, 2024, Father Miller petitioned the Bishop as such.

Father Miller attests that relegating Saint Stephen church to profane use is not likely to result in harm to the good of souls (cf. can. 1222 §). He is aware of the obligation to see to it that the church, if relegated, not be given over to sordid use.

The above information was shared with the members of the Presbyteral Council on February 28, 2024, at their regularly scheduled meeting held at St. Mark Catholic Center in Erie. Having considered the matter attentively, the members of the Council voted on whether to recommend to me that I grant the petition of the pastor to relegate Saint Stephen church to profane but not sordid use. The vote was 13 members in favor, 0 opposed, and 1 abstention.

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

Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the best possible means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Saint Joseph parish, while considering that Saint Stephen church no longer serves as a parish church, that entrance to the edifice by the public is now

unsafe; that the obligation of maintaining the Saint Stephen church building has placed an unsustainable financial burden on Saint Joseph parish; that the funds required to repair the structure are unavailable and would otherwise be much more prudently spent on other parish ministries; that there is no pastoral necessity for the church edifice; that the pastor and members of the finance and pastoral councils have petitioned for the relegation of the church; and that there does not appear to be any probable detriment to the good of souls, I judge that the aforementioned reasons, when considered cumulatively, constitute the grave cause required by the law (cf. can. 1222 §2) for the relegation of the church to profane but not sordid use, and I hereby decree the following:

Saint Stephen church of Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City is relegated to profane but not sordid use, according to the norm of can. 1222 §2.

This decree is effective March 18, 2024; anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 11th day of March, 2024

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor