



## DECREE

### RELEGATING SACRED HEART CHURCH (SHARON) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

#### History

The original Sacred Heart Church in Sharon, Pennsylvania was dedicated on August 3, 1868. It was built to serve the spiritual needs of Sacred Heart Parish which had been founded only four years prior for Catholics – mostly Irish – in the western section of the City of Sharon.

Before long, the parish outgrew the original church, and the current Sacred Heart Church was dedicated on September 11, 1892. During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Sacred Heart Parish flourished, but the demographic changes affecting the Shenango Valley area and all of northwestern Pennsylvania eventually took their toll. By 2010 the City of Sharon had lost almost half of its population since its peak in 1950, with Sacred Heart Parish seeing a significant loss of parishioners. By 2015, the parish had only a fraction of its former membership. Moreover, the original distinction between Irish Catholics on the west side of Sharon and German Catholics on the east side of Sharon had long since ceased to be a pressing pastoral concern. By a decree of September 21, 2016, which took effect on February 13, 2017, Sacred Heart Parish was merged into Saint Joseph Parish in Sharon.

#### Current Situation

As a result of the aforementioned merger, Sacred Heart Church became a secondary church of Saint Joseph Parish which now has two churches: the parish church itself (Saint Joseph), and a secondary church (Sacred Heart). Consistent with the norm of particular law, all weekend and Holy Day Masses in Saint Joseph Parish are celebrated in the parish church. Consequently, Sunday Masses have not been celebrated in Sacred Heart Church since the merger of the parish.

The area in which Sacred Heart Church is located has seen considerable crime in recent years. In 2017 alone, the rectory attached to the church has been vandalized twice, and there were sixteen fires in the vicinity of the church which had been ruled as arson. Quite understandably, there is a concern for the security of the building.



Of the 241 registered households which had been registered as belonging to Sacred Heart Parish prior to February 2017, only about 40 households re-registered as members of Saint Joseph Parish. This is in part because a good number of those 241 households were located in the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio. Many of the former parishioners, therefore, have either joined one of the other parishes in the Shenango Valley closer to where they reside or have returned to the Diocese of Youngstown. The 40 families who have registered in Saint Joseph Parish actually live within the territorial limits of the parish.

The merger of Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph Parishes in Sharon effected the transfer of all assets and obligations from Sacred Heart Parish to Saint Joseph Parish, in accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121). Although Saint Joseph Parish received \$50,000 from the accounts of the former Sacred Heart Parish, this did little to offset the debt in excess of \$165,000 incurred from the former parish in back assessments to the regional Catholic school system. Furthermore, the increased offertory resulting from the enlarged and newly-configured Saint Joseph Parish has not kept pace with the increased expense of maintaining two churches. Prior to the merger, in 2015, Saint Joseph Parish by itself had a deficit of \$70,000, which increased to \$135,000 in 2016. After the merger, with the added responsibility for Sacred Heart Church and the acquisition of a substantial debt resulting from the merger, it has become clear that Saint Joseph Parish is unable to sustain the additional burden of maintaining a second church.

On July 28, 2017, the pastor of Saint Joseph Parish discussed with the members of the parish Finance Council the possibility of closing Sacred Heart Church. He did the same with the members of the parish Pastoral Council on September 11, 2017. Both councils considered the various facts, including: 1) the parish's financial capacity or lack thereof to maintain two churches, 2) recent acts of vandalism in the vicinity of Sacred Heart Church and concern for the security of the building, 3) the fact that only 40 households of the original 241 were now listed as members of Saint Joseph Parish, 4) the fact that the remaining households had returned to parishes closer to them, including in the Diocese of Youngstown, and 5) the fact that the overall burden of maintaining a second church was draining Saint Joseph Parish of resources needed for the general life and ministry of the parish. The members of both councils gave their unanimous support to the proposal to relegate Sacred Heart Church to profane but not sordid use, and on October 25, 2017 the pastor formally petitioned that the church be relegated.

I brought the matter of Sacred Heart Church in Sharon before the Presbyteral Council on December 4, 2017, making certain that the council members had all necessary information to provide me with their informed opinion, including what is understood as a sufficiently grave cause according to the norm of can. 1222 §2. The reasons put forth by the pastor in his petition were all considered, and priests familiar with the parish offered their own insights. Among these were the Dean and the regional Episcopal Vicar, both of whom gave their support to the pastor's petition. During the discussion, it was further clarified that the petition to relegate Sacred Heart Church had originated among the members of the parish Finance Council and the parish Pastoral Council. After the conclusion of the discussion, I asked the members of the Presbyteral Council for their advice on the aforementioned proposal to relegate Sacred Heart Church to profane but not sordid use. They unanimously supported the proposal.

All of the requirements of canons 50, 51, 127, 166, and 1222 §2 have been fulfilled.

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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 in Sharon together with the larger Catholic community of the Shenango Valley, while considering the following: that Sacred Heart Church does not serve as a parish church; that since February 2017 there have been no Sunday Masses celebrated there; that the area in which Sacred Heart Church is located gives rise to a well-founded concern for the security of the building; that the 2017 merger of Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph Parishes has left Saint Joseph Parish with a considerable debt that has further stretched Saint Joseph Parish's already-insufficient financial resources; that the parish lacks the means to provide even for maintenance together with the annual insurance and utility expenditures for Sacred Heart Church without taking needed resources from other valuable parish ministries; that there is no pastoral need for the church edifice; that the pastor and members of the finance council and members of the pastoral council 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 do 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 that:

**Sacred Heart Church, being a secondary church of Saint Joseph Parish in Sharon, is relegated to profane but not sordid use, according to the norm of can. 1222 §2.**

I hereby further decree that:

**Prior to any eventual sale of the former Sacred Heart Church, all sacred objects be removed and, in accord with particular law, the permission of the Most Reverend Bishop be required for the sale of the former church.**

This decree is effective March 25, 2018, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie  
on this 12th day of March, 2018

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

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

*Christopher J. Singer*

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL  
Chancellor