



## DECREE

### EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT BIBIANA PARISH (GALETON) INTO SAINT EULALIA PARISH (COUDERSPORT)

#### History

##### A. Saint Eulalia Parish, Coudersport

The first Catholics in Coudersport were Irish immigrants who arrived in the 1840's. A priest would come every three months to celebrate Mass in a private home. Most often the priest would be the pastor of Saint Mary Parish in Sartwell. The parish in Coudersport was established in 1883, although the first church was not built until 1885. It was named Saint Eulalia in honor of a deceased daughter of the Keating family, who had donated the land for the church to be built. Around 1902 a new brownstone church was erected to replace the older wooden edifice. At various times over the years Saint Eulalia served the missions of Saint Augustine, Austin; Saint Bibiana, Galeton; and Saint Germain, Germania. In 2009 Saint Eulalia was partnered, and began to share a pastor, with Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish in Port Allegany.

##### B. Saint Bibiana Parish, Galeton

Catholics first settled in the Galeton area in the 1860's. For the first few decades they, along with the other Catholic communities in Potter County, were served by Benedictine priests visiting from St. Marys, Pennsylvania. Saint Bibiana church was eventually built in 1888 as a mission of Saint Germain Parish, Germania. In the early 1900's both Saint Bibiana and Saint Germain became mission churches of Saint Eulalia, Coudersport. Saint Bibiana Parish received its first resident pastor in 1917. At that time Saint Germain became a mission of Saint Bibiana and remained so for almost a hundred years. Saint Germain finally closed in 2014. In 2017 Saint Bibiana took on the care of the missions of Saint Augustine, Austin and Sacred Heart, Genesee.

#### Current Situation

This proposed reconfiguration involves four distinct church buildings. Saint Eulalia Parish has one church – St. Eulalia church. Saint Bibiana Parish possesses three church buildings: Saint Bibiana church in Galeton, Saint Augustine church in Austin, and Sacred Heart church in Genesee.



The territory of Saint Eulalia and Saint Bibiana parishes comprises the vast majority of Potter County, Pennsylvania. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Potter County has decreased by more than 1,800 people in the period from the year 2000 to 2022 – a decline of 10% in just over two decades. The population drop results from, among other factors, a loss of manufacturing and technology jobs in the region. Following the general population trend, parish membership has also declined significantly. In 2012/2013, Saint Eulalia reported 221 registered households, and in 2021/2022 that number had declined to 199 – a drop of about 10%. The average Mass attendance at Saint Eulalia (as reported in the annual October count) declined from 307 in 2014 to 164 in 2022 – a decline of 46%. Similarly, the average Mass attendance for St. Bibiana Parish declined from 109 in 2014 to 33 in 2022 – a drop of 60%. The decline in both general and Catholic population – combined with the decreasing number of available priests – necessitates the reconfiguration of parishes and better use of resources in order to assure the proper care of souls in Potter County.

The Diocese of Erie's comprehensive pastoral planning process began in 2014. In the years that followed, vicariate and deanery meetings were held throughout the diocese to gather information and ideas from pastors, parish leaders, and parishioners in general. As the demographic conditions in the Bradford Deanery changed in recent years, the need for parish reconfiguration became more urgent.

On March 9, 2023, Bishop Persico presented Presbyteral Council with a preliminary plan for parish reconfiguration in the Bradford Deanery. The preliminary plan was opened for discussion among the members of the Council.

On March 16, 2023, at a meeting held at Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport, Bishop Persico unveiled the Bradford Deanery preliminary plan to the priests of the deanery and a representative group of lay leaders from each parish. The Bishop then opened a several-week period of comment and feedback for pastors and people to give their views on the proposed changes. The original preliminary plan called for Saint Bibiana Parish (and its two secondary churches of Saint Augustine and Sacred Heart) to be merged into Saint Eulalia Parish. Additionally, Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish in Port Allegany was proposed to merge into Saint Eulalia Parish. This proposal would create a parish with vast territory spanning all of Potter County and part of eastern McKean County. The pastors and people of the region commented that, with only one priest foreseen to be available to serve Saint Eulalia Parish, the territory would be too large – especially for one priest to travel between various churches for Sunday Masses. As a result, the preliminary plan was modified to instead propose merging Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish into Saint Elizabeth Parish in Smethport – leaving the other proposals intact. The current pastors in these communities communicated that many efficiencies would result from these revised proposed parish reconfigurations.

At the June 22, 2023, meeting of the Presbyteral Council, Bishop Persico presented the revised proposal for parish reconfigurations in Potter County. The Presbyteral Council unanimously approved the plan and recommended to Bishop Persico to merge Saint Bibiana Parish (and its secondary churches) into Saint Eulalia Parish. St. Eulalia church will serve as the parish church.

Sacred Heart church will become a secondary mission church of Saint Eulalia parish, with Saint Augustine and Saint Bibiana churches becoming secondary churches of Saint Eulalia Parish.

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

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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 the entire Potter County area, while also considering the challenges presented by demographic change and the reduced number of priests; the genuine desire on the part of parishioners and clergy alike to realign parish structures to best situate them for building a strong future; the envisioning of this merger as an integral part of the overall pastoral plan for the Bradford Deanery<sup>1</sup>; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Bibiana Parish in Galeton is to be merged into St. Eulalia Parish in Coudersport.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Eulalia Parish. It shall be territorial in nature, with the parish retaining all of the territory which it now possesses, and to it will be added all of the territory of Saint Bibiana Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Bibiana Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Eulalia Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Bibiana Parish shall be transferred to Saint Eulalia Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Eulalia church.
6. Sacred Heart church in Genesee shall remain a secondary mission church, but now belonging to Saint Eulalia Parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is permitted in Sacred Heart church.
7. Saint Bibiana church in Galeton, and Saint Augustine church in Austin, will remain secondary churches without mission status, but now belonging to Saint Eulalia Parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, are not permitted in Saint Bibiana and Saint Augustine churches.
8. Furthermore, both Saint Bibiana and Saint Augustine churches are to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214). As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in each church every year on the solemnity of the church's title (August 28 for Saint Augustine church, December 2 for Saint Bibiana church), in accord with

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<sup>1</sup> The pastoral plan for the Bradford Deanery includes the following goals: to: 1) create a more vibrant Catholic community, 2) improve Mass attendance and participation in parish life, 3) engage younger Catholics, 4) reach out to fallen-away Catholics and new parishioners, 5) increase the parish's community and ecumenical involvement, 6) create a more welcoming environment, and 7) sustain the parish financially.

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.

9. The territory of Saint Eulalia Parish shall now comprise all of Potter County except for the northwestern townships of Sharon and Oswayo.

This decree is effective at the start of Advent, December 2, 2023. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie  
on this 10<sup>th</sup> day of November, 2023

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

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

*Christopher J. Singer*

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL  
Chancellor