



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT STEPHEN PARISH (OIL CITY) INTO SAINT JOSEPH PARISH (OIL CITY)

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, the parish was divided when the area located south of the Allegheny River was erected in 1898 as Saint Stephen Parish. This action significantly reduced the geographic size of Saint Joseph Parish. The erection of a personal parish for Catholics of Polish background, i.e., Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, did not affect the territory of Saint Joseph Parish, but the subsequent creation in 1922 of a new territorial parish named Our Lady Help of Christians in Siverly did further reduce the 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 parish 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 that built in 1907.

The territory of Saint Stephen Parish is currently greater than its original geographic footprint. On February 13, 2017, Saint Venantius parish in Rouseville was subsumed into Saint Stephen Parish, effectively enlarging the territory of the parish to include the areas west of Oil Creek. As a result, Saint Stephen Parish today is larger geographically than it was at its founding in 1898.

Current Situation: The Parishes

The years leading up to the Second World War saw substantial growth of the Church across the entire diocese, marked by the opening of new parishes, the building of schools and churches and



convents, and the general flourishing of a Catholic culture. In some areas, this growth continued after the Second World War, but in other areas like Oil City a population decline had already begun by 1940. The population of Oil City in 1930 numbered more than 22,000, whereas the US Census Bureau estimates the 2018 population of Oil City to be fewer than 10,000. The population decrease is recently averaging slightly less than 1% per year.

The demographic decrease is far more striking in the Oil City parishes than in the area's general population as a whole. Taking into account adjustments for households merged into these parishes in 2017, parish census figures show an annual decrease of 4.4 % at Saint Joseph Parish, and 5.5% at Saint Stephen Parish. Currently, Saint Joseph Parish lists 335 households while Saint Stephen Parish lists 398 households. At the current pace, Saint Joseph will soon be the larger of the two parishes. The Catholic community of Oil City now numbers fewer than 750 households.

Part of this dramatic change in parishioner statistics is due to improved census figures which more accurately reflect true parish membership, but it cannot be denied that there is an actual steep decline in the number of parishioners. Simply put, younger generations of Catholics in Oil City are not replacing older generations. Whereas there were 323 baptisms in Oil City in 1950, in 2018 there were only 14, nearly a 96% decrease.

On the positive side, since restructuring in 2017 which placed the two parishes in Oil City under a combined pastoral leadership, the Catholic community in Oil City is reinvigorating efforts at evangelization, social assistance, adult faith formation, and other efforts. Nonetheless, although these efforts may slow the precipitous decline in the number of Catholics, there are no indications that the situation will reverse itself, given the general decline of religion in the American culture as a whole and the continued decline of the general population of the Oil City region.

Current Situation: The Church Buildings

In August 2018, it was discovered that the towers of St. Stephen Church needed emergency repair work when stones fell from the towers. Temporary emergency measures were put in place to prevent other stones from dislodging. It had become obvious, however, that major decisions would soon need to be made regarding the building's deteriorating condition.

After some preliminary discussions, an *ad hoc* planning committee was formed in May of 2019 to look at the present situation of the parishes, the buildings, and the future of the Catholic community in Oil City as a whole. The question was: How can the Catholic community of Oil City position itself to build a foundation for the future? The committee had ten members, of whom 6 were elected and 4 were appointed. The committee met with the combined pastoral council of both parishes and with other parishioners, studied the available data, and then obtained the approval of the combined pastoral council to publicized a proposed plan for Oil City. The committee then asked parishioners for feedback.

Parishioners were able to provide feedback for one month, at the end of which the committee reviewed. Numerous concerns and suggestions were made and taken into consideration. In the end, the committee believed that the majority of these suggestions and concerns could be satisfactorily

met with the original proposal, and they re-proposed the plan essentially unchanged. The pastoral council reviewed it again, and then voted in favor of recommending to the pastor that he send a proposal to the Bishop to merge Saint Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish. As a result, on October 23, 2019 Father John Miller, as pastor of both Saint Joseph Parish and St. Stephen Parish, wrote to me as Diocesan Bishop asking that I merge St. Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish.

I brought the matter of the proposed merger before the Presbyteral Council on November 7, 2019. I asked the council members for their advice on the aforementioned proposal. The council discussed the precipitous decline in the census of the two parishes, the deteriorating condition of both Saint Joseph Church and Saint Stephen Church and the nature and extent of the repairs needed at each, the estimated costs of repairing each, the various financial reserves available to the two parishes, and the advisability of depleting significant amounts of those reserves on emergency repairs – effectively leaving little for pastoral activities. The council members also discussed the process that had taken place in Oil City for arriving at the proposal, together with an overview of the feedback received from parishioners. After considerable discussion and the weighing of several options, the members of the Presbyteral Council expressed their unanimous support for the proposal to merge Saint Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish, with Saint Joseph Church retaining its status as the parochial church.

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 the Oil City area, while also considering the already diminished number of parishioners of both Saint Joseph Parish and Saint Stephen Parish and the projected further decline of their number, the relevant demographics of each parish, the historical origin of Saint Stephen Parish as a outgrowth of Saint Joseph Parish, the physical condition of both Saint Joseph and Saint Stephen Churches and the estimated costs to repair each, the possibility of better stewardship in the use of temporal goods and personnel, the results of a broad consultation of the faithful in the matter, 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, Saint Stephen 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, and to it will be added all of the territory of Saint Stephen Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Stephen Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Joseph Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Stephen Parish shall be transferred to Saint Joseph Parish.

5. The parish church shall be Saint Joseph Church. Saint Stephen Church shall become a secondary church – without mission status – of Saint Joseph Parish.
6. Saint Stephen 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 Saint Stephen Church every year on the solemnity of the church's title (December 26), 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 January 1, 2020, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 15th day of November, 2019

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor