



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT PAUL PARISH (ERIE) INTO SACRED HEART OF JESUS PARISH (ERIE)

History

A. Saint Paul Parish, Erie

The Italian Catholic community in Erie organized in 1891 as Saint Paul Roman Catholic Church. Though they first celebrated the sacraments in a store in Little Italy, the community was soon able to purchase a former Presbyterian church. Parishioners moved the church a block and a half to the corner of Seventeenth and Walnut Street, and totally remodeled the interior before it was dedicated. Work began on the present church in 1928 at the new location of Sixteenth and Walnut Street. The parish showed great ingenuity and economy by finishing the exterior stonework with stones discarded in the remodeling of the city streets. After several years delay due to the Great Depression, the present church was dedicated on March 17, 1935. The parish built a school in 1956, which operated until 1984. In 2017, St. Paul was partnered with St. Andrew and Sacred Heart parishes.

B. Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, Erie

By 1890 the German population of Erie had become so large that they had outgrown the two German parishes of St. Joseph and St. Michael. A group therefore petitioned Bishop Tobias Mullen to establish a new parish. The fledgling parish purchased property on Twenty-Sixth and Plum Streets. In 1894 the newly ordained Reverend Francis Bender was appointed as the first pastor and work began on a church. For several years there was a controversy over whether the parish name was Saint Joachim or Sacred Heart of Jesus. The matter was settled in 1898, when they reopened the cornerstone and found the name *Herz Jesu Gemeinde*. The church was completed and dedicated in 1899, and expanded in 1920. As time went on, Sacred Heart continued to buy more lots until the parish owned the entire block. The present church, built on the corner of Twenty-Sixth and Liberty Streets, was completed in 1953. The interior was completely renovated after Vatican II. The parish was served by “team leadership” and co-pastors in the 1970’s and 1990’s before going back to the single pastor model. The parish also ran a school for most of its existence. Sacred Heart School went through several buildings, with the last being built in 1960, until it finally closed in 2006. In 2017, Sacred Heart was partnered with St. Andrew and St. Paul parishes.

Current Situation

Saint Paul Parish and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish are both located on the West side of the City of Erie in Erie County. Regarding sacred edifices, Saint Paul Parish and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish each possess one church with attached rectories. The church buildings are 1.3 miles apart from each other.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Erie County peaked at 281,502 around the year 2012. By 2022, the county population had fallen to 267,689 – a drop of 4.9%. The population of the City of Erie peaked at 138,440 around the year 1960. By the year 2000, the City had approximately 103,748 residents. In 2021, that number had dropped to 93,999 – a decline of 32% since its 1960 peak.

The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been much steeper in recent years than the general decline in population. Saint Paul Parish reported 416 registered parishioners in 2015 and 337 in 2023 – a drop of 19%. The October count Mass attendance estimate for 2015 was 174 and in 2023 it was 142. This indicates an 18% decline in Mass attendance over the last 8 years. Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish reported 1,654 members in 2015 and 1,161 in 2023 – a drop of 30%. The October count dropped from 545 in 2015 to 192 in 2023 – a decline of about 65%.

Saint Paul Parish, Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, and Saint Andrew Parish have been partnered since 2017 with notable collaboration between them developing during those years. As a result of the partnership, each of the three parishes has only one Mass on Sunday or on Saturday evening. Therefore, it is also useful to look at the Mass attendance trends by combining all three parishes. In that case, the total reported Mass attendance in 2015 was 1,064 and in 2023 was 445 – a combined decline of 58%.

The general population decline in the City of Erie, combined with a more dramatic decline in the Catholic population in the neighborhoods of Saint Paul and Sacred Heart of Jesus parishes – as well as the decreasing number of available priests – necessitates a reconfiguration of parishes and better use of resources in order to properly provide for the care of souls on the West side of the City of Erie.

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 conditions in the West Erie Deanery changed in recent years, the need for parish reconfiguration became more necessary.

Beginning in roughly 2018, a directed study of the demographics, and Catholic needs, in the City of Erie was undertaken. Population trend data was projected by the Meitler firm. Meetings with pastors and parishioners also took place on the local level. On June 22, 2023, Bishop Persico presented a preliminary plan for parish reconfiguration in Erie County (which includes both the East and West Erie Deaneries) to the Presbyteral Council and opened it up for discussion among members.

On August 29, 2023, at a meeting held at St. Mark Catholic Center, Bishop Persico unveiled the Erie County preliminary plan to the pastors of the deanery and a representative group of lay leaders from each parish. The unveiling of the preliminary plan was preceded by three letters written by Bishop Persico which were read to parishioners (and published on the diocesan website) explaining the need for pastoral planning in Erie County and inviting the prayer and participation of all parishioners. Following the August 29 meeting, 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 preliminary plan proposed that Saint Paul and Saint Stephen of Hungary parishes be merged into Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish. Sacred Heart of Jesus church would become the parish church, Saint Stephen of Hungary church would become a secondary mission church (i.e. with Mass on Saturday evening or on Sunday), and Saint Paul church would become a secondary church without mission status (i.e. no Mass Saturday evening or on Sundays). The enlarged Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish would then partner with Blessed Sacrament Parish.

After receiving feedback from parishioners and extensive consultation with the pastors of the area, the preliminary plan was changed to the following: Saint Paul Parish would merge into Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish with Saint Paul church becoming a secondary mission church (i.e. with Mass on Saturday evening or on Sundays) and then the enlarged Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish would be partnered with Saint Joseph Parish in Erie. Sacred Heart of Jesus and Saint Joseph churches are one mile apart.

At the February 28, 2024 meeting of the Presbyteral Council, Bishop Persico presented the revised proposal for parish reconfiguration for Erie County. The Presbyteral Council unanimously approved the proposal to merge Saint Paul Parish into Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, and then to partner Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish with Saint Joseph Parish.

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 West side of the City of Erie, while also considering the challenges presented by demographic decline 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; and envisioning this merger as an integral part of the overall pastoral plan for the City of Erie and Erie County¹; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Paul Parish in Erie shall be merged and subsumed into Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Erie.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.

¹ The pastoral plan for Erie County 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 parishes' community and ecumenical involvement, 6) create a more welcoming environment, and 7) sustain the parishes financially.

3. All sacramental records from Saint Paul Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Paul Parish shall be transferred to Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Sacred Heart of Jesus church.
6. Saint Paul church shall become a secondary mission church of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is permitted in Saint Paul church.
7. Furthermore, as required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in each church every year on the solemnity of that church's title, 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.
8. Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish shall be territorial in nature, with boundaries as follows:

In Erie, beginning at the intersection of 12th Street and French Street; south on French Street to the Norfolk Southern Railway Company railroad tracks near 19th Street; west on the railroad tracks to Chestnut Street; south on Chestnut Street to Peach Street/US Route 19; south on Peach Street to West 38th Street; west on West 38th Street to Elmwood Avenue; north on Elmwood Avenue to West 26th Street/US Route 20; east on West 26th Street to Cranberry Street; north on Cranberry Street to West 12th Street/state highway 5; east on 12th Street to French Street.
9. Furthermore, as will be enacted in a separate decree, Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish is to be partnered with Saint Joseph Parish in Erie.

This decree is effective July 9, 2024. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

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

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor