



## DECREE

### EFFECTING THE RELEGATION OF OUR LADY HELP OF CHRISTIANS CHURCH (OIL CITY) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

#### History

On November 8, 1914, Help of Christians chapel was dedicated as a chapel of St. Joseph parish, Oil City. It was built particularly to accommodate the elderly and young children who had difficulty climbing the hill to St. Joseph church. In 1921, Bishop John Mark Gannon established Our Lady Help of Christians as a parish in its own right, and the church became the parish church.

Our Lady Help of Christians served as a parish church until February 13, 2017, when Our Lady Help of Christians parish merged into Saint Joseph parish. With that merger, the church became a secondary church without mission status of Saint Joseph parish, and Saint Joseph parish became responsible for the upkeep of three churches: the parish church (Saint Joseph) and two secondary churches without mission status (Assumption church and Our Lady Help of Christians church). Assumption church was relegated to profane use effective July 19, 2019, relieving Saint Joseph parish of much of the financial burden for its upkeep. From July 19 through the end of December 2019, Saint Joseph parish was responsible for the upkeep of two churches: the parish church (Saint Joseph) and one secondary church without mission status (Our Lady Help of Christians).

On January 1, 2020, another parish merger took place in Oil City, with Saint Stephen parish being merged into Saint Joseph parish. The result is that Saint Joseph parish is now responsible for the upkeep of four churches: the parish church (Saint Joseph), one secondary church with mission status (Saint Stephen) and two secondary churches without mission status (Our Lady Help of Christians and Saint Venantius).

Although significant funds for the upkeep of these churches is available due to the merger, the greater part of these are currently sequestered by order of the Bishop pending the outcome of a hierarchical recourse against that same merger. As a result, the parish can provide for the upkeep of Saint Stephen church and Saint Venantius church from the sequestered funds but must provide for the upkeep of Saint Joseph church and Our Lady Help of Christians church from the smaller pool of un-sequestered funds. The parish is also financially responsible for numerous other buildings which had formerly been under the care of five separate and distinct parishes.



## Current Situation

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.*

Since February 2017, Our Lady Help of Christians church has been used for six (6) funerals, one (1) baptism, and no (0) weddings. Regularly scheduled (i.e., monthly) public divine worship at the church ceased in March 2019. Due to the discovery of a significant presence of mold and mildew in the church which poses a considerable health risk, the church has been unusable since then. Sunday Mass is celebrated in the parish church of St. Joseph and in the secondary church of St. Stephen, which are sufficient to meet the pastoral needs of the parish. As such, the Reverend John Miller, pastor, attests to the fact that there is no pastoral need for Our Lady Help of Christians church.

Furthermore, at least three of the four churches belonging to the parish have suffered greatly from many years of deferred maintenance. Saint Joseph parish does not have the financial resources to repair and maintain all four churches in a manner suitable for the worthy celebration of the sacraments. The parish church itself needs immediate repairs costing an estimated several hundred thousand dollars. These financial burdens are impeding the parish's ability to support Catholic education in the region; to support the charitable works of the St. Elizabeth Center which is housed on parish property; and to tend to other parish pastoral needs and outreach. The financial strain is depriving pastoral programs of their necessary resources and thereby harming the overall apostolate of the parish.

Our Lady Help of Christians church itself is in very poor physical condition. The empty rectory is in disrepair, which contributes to the damages sustained by the church building. Part of the rectory basement forms the sacristy of the church and connects directly to the sanctuary. While it is theoretically possible to demolish the rectory and leave the church standing, this would eliminate not only the sacristy of the church but would also leave the church without any running water. The significant mold and mildew problem poses a health risk to anyone using the building. The estimated cost just to have specialists remove and replace the mold-infested materials is approximately \$44,000, after which time other needed repairs would still need to be made. The roof needs to be replaced as well at an estimated cost of \$6000.

On January 28, 2020 and February 6, 2020 respectively, the Reverend John L. Miller, pastor, obtained the unanimous support of both the parish finance council and the parish

pastoral council to petition that Our Lady Help of Christians 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).

Father Miller attests that relegating Our Lady Help of Christians church to profane use is not likely to result in harm to the good of souls (cf. can. 1222 §2). He is aware of the obligation to see to it that the church, if relegated, not be given over to sordid use.

This information was shared with the members of the Presbyteral Council on February 19, 2020. Having considered the matter attentively, the members of the Council unanimously recommended to me that I grant the petition of the pastor to relegate Our Lady Help of Christians church to profane but not sordid use.

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, while considering that Our Lady Help of Christians church no longer serves as a parish church, that regularly scheduled Masses ceased there in March of 2019; that the church has been used for only six (6) funerals and one (1) baptism since February of 2017; that the obligation of maintaining four separate church buildings has placed an unsustainable financial burden on Saint Joseph parish; that the funds required to repair the structure are needed for and would be much more prudently spent on other parish ministries; that there is no pastoral need for the church edifice; that the pastor 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, 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:

**Our Lady Help of Christians 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 July 19, 2020 anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie  
on this 1st day of July, 2020

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

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

*Christopher J. Singer*

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL  
Chancellor