



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT JOSEPH PARISH (MOUNT JEWETT) INTO SAINT ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY PARISH (SMETHPORT)

History

A. Saint Joseph Parish

Mass was first celebrated in the Mount Jewett area in the late 1880's, with priests traveling at times from Smethport, Kane, or Rasselas. On May 11, 1896 the Catholic community in Mount Jewett was formally recognized as a mission of Holy Cross Parish in Rasselas, which itself had been a mission of Saint Joseph Parish in Warren until earlier that same year. Plans were made to build a church, which was solemnly blessed on May 9, 1897. Records indicate that in 1900 Saint Joseph mission in Mount Jewett was itself raised to the level of a parish. The parish had mission communities of its own at Saint Edmund in Hazelhurst (closed in 1967) and Saint Joseph in Mount Alton (closed in 1990). The parish has not had a resident pastor since 1998, when the pastoral care of the parish was given to the resident pastor of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport.

B. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish

By 1851, Masses were celebrated in the Smethport area by priests traveling from Saint Mary church in Sartwell and even at times from Pittsburgh. Eventually, Saint Elizabeth church was constructed in Smethport as a mission church of Sartwell. The new church was blessed on April 26, 1876. Records indicate that the mission community of Saint Elizabeth in Smethport was raised to the level of parish in 1879. Following a devastating fire in 1904 which completely destroyed the church and rectory, the current church was constructed and solemnly blessed on July 10, 1907. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish had its own mission community at Saint Sabina mission church in Clermont, until the mission was eventually closed in 1940 due to declining population.

Current Situation

Like all of Potter County and the rest of northwestern Pennsylvania, the Smethport and Mount Jewett area has not been immune to the significant demographic declines which have transpired in recent decades. According to the US Census Bureau, Mount Jewett's population of 919 individuals in 2010 was slightly more than 60% of what it had been in its peak in 1940. By contrast, Smethport has fared better, with its 2010 population of 1,655 persons still nearly 90% of its peak in 1940.

There is no indication, however, that this decline in population in either community is likely to reverse itself. In 2015, Saint Joseph Parish listed only 59 households with an average Sunday Mass attendance of 46 persons, while Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish listed 223 households with an average weekend Mass attendance of 226 individuals. Furthermore, it should be noted that the pastor of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, who is also the pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Mount Jewett, is also responsible for approximately 1500 souls in the Federal Correctional Institution in Lafayette (FCI McKean).

Due to diminishing numbers of parishioners, an aging population, the shortage of clergy, the presence of FCI McKean and the pastoral needs attached thereto, and the need to practice better stewardship of both personnel and financial resources, the long-term sustainability of separate parishes in Mount Jewett and Smethport is no longer possible. Given that Saint Joseph Parish and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish have shared a pastor for the last eighteen years, it seems that the care of souls for the faithful in those parishes could be better served by a more efficient use of personnel and temporal resources, greater collaboration between their communities of the faithful, and a unified pastoral vision for both parishes.

In pursuit of that end, as a part of a comprehensive pastoral planning process involving extensive study, collaboration, and dialogue throughout the diocese, together with an analysis of objective data regarding demographic shifts and population trends for individual parishes, specific communities and regions, I brought the matter of Saint Joseph Parish in Mount Jewett and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport before the Presbyteral Council on March 9, 2016. With the support of the Presbyteral Council, I announced on April 13, 2016 a preliminary plan to merge Saint Joseph Parish into the larger Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, with Saint Joseph church becoming a secondary church of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish but without mission status.

I specified a time period in which I would welcome feedback in response to this preliminary proposal. As a result, I received input and advice from the shared pastor of Saint Joseph and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parishes, from the parishioners themselves, from the Vicar Forane and the Vicar General, and from those responsible for overseeing the development of the pastoral plan. I shared the results of this feedback with the members of the Presbyteral Council. In light of the new information, I then asked the council members once again for their advice on the aforementioned proposal to merge Saint Joseph Parish into Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, but with the change that Saint Joseph church would be granted mission status. The Presbyteral Council members expressed their unanimous support on June 28, 2016.

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

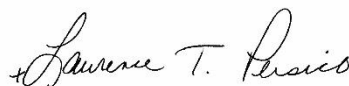
Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the need for a stronger and more sustainable means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Saint Joseph Parish in Mount Jewett and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport, while also considering the already diminished number of parishioners, the lack of available priests which renders it impossible to provide a full-time pastor for either parish, the relevant demographics of each parish as well as projected future trends, the historical origins of both Saint Joseph Parish and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, the

fact that both parishes have shared a pastor for the past eighteen years, the possibility of better stewardship in the shared use of temporal goods and personnel between the two parishes, and the general plan of pastoral care not only for the Smethport and Mount Jewett area but also for the Diocese as a whole, I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Joseph Parish in Mount Jewett shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Elizabeth of Hungary 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 Joseph Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Joseph Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Joseph Parish shall be transferred to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Elizabeth of Hungary church. In light of the distance which the faithful, many of them elderly, from points beyond Mount Jewett would otherwise have to travel for Mass, Saint Joseph church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary 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 Joseph church.
6. Furthermore, Saint Joseph church is 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 on the solemnity of the 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.

This decree is effective February 13, 2017, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 22nd day of September, 2016



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



The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor