



DECREE

EFFECTING THE RELEGATION OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST CHURCH (GIRARD) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

History

The origins of Saint John the Evangelist parish date back to the establishment of the Diocese of Erie in 1853. By 1855, Masses were being celebrated in Girard by priests traveling back and forth from Erie. A new church was built and the first Mass was celebrated there on Christmas, 1857. By 1869, the parish began keeping its own records, no longer dependent on the care provided by other parishes. With the original church no longer adequate for parish needs, the Culbertson home was purchased in 1941 to serve as a temporary church until a newer church could be built. In 1945 work began on a multi-purpose building located on Olin Avenue that would include both a school and a church, and on August 25, 1946 the church housed in that building was dedicated by Archbishop Gannon. The original plan at the time to build a permanent church facing Main Street never materialized, however, so that the church housed in the multi-purpose building has served as the parish church until the present time.

Current Situation

On March 18, 2020, by decree of the Bishop, all parishes in the diocese suspended public celebrations of the Mass to help stem the tide of the COVID-19 pandemic. Permission to resume public Masses took effect on June 1, 2020, provided that only every third pew would be used and that there would be at least six feet of distance between separate households. Using the current parish church would have greatly restricted access to the sacraments, and so the celebration of Sunday Masses was transferred to the parish center on Main Street, where it has remained to the present. Weekday Masses continue to be celebrated in the parish church.

The parish labors under a heavy burden of debt, and so the pastor appointed a task force to study the long-term feasibility of parish finances and facilities. The task force concluded that the parish could not continue to maintain the parish center on Main Street as well as the multi-purpose church and former school building on Olin Avenue. For the financial viability of the parish, and with ever-increasing urgency, one of the two properties would need to be sold.

In light of the task force's report, the parish was informed on the weekend of November 20-21, 2021 that parish center would no longer be available for rent (already on pause due to the pandemic), that Sunday Masses would continue to be celebrated in the parish center for the time being, and – in light of the need to sell one of the two properties – that a process would begin to determine whether it would be better to retain the property on Olin Avenue or on Main Street.

Several professionals (a real estate appraiser, a civil engineer, and a liturgical consultant) were asked to give their professional opinions. From these opinions, it became clear that the parish church is in need of renovation, but the amount of work required would trigger the legal obligation to meet current building code standards, including making the building ADA¹ compliant. The cost of those repairs was estimated at approximately \$1.1 million. The parish center could continue to be used for sacred worship at a fraction of the cost. The sacred furnishings from the parish church could easily be moved to the parish center, with gradual improvements to be made as the parish could afford from time to time. The seat of the parish (i.e., its official address and the location of its offices) could be transferred to the parish center.

On the afternoon and evening of March 28, 2022 these findings were relayed to parishioners at a set of public meetings. The majority of those in attendance expressed support for the proposed transfer of the seat of the parish, for making permanent the transfer of divine worship from the parish church to the parish center, and for relegating the current church to profane but not sordid use.

On April 19, members of the parish finance council and the parish pastoral council, at a joint meeting but by separate vote, unanimously asked the pastor to petition that the current parish church be relegated to profane but not sordid use. Being the only person who can legitimately claim rights concerning the church edifice, the pastor has given his consent (cf. can. 1222 §2) and on April 21, 2022 the pastor formally petitioned the Bishop to 1) transfer the seat of the parish from Olin Avenue to Main Street, and 2) to authorize the transfer of the celebration of the liturgy to the parish center, which would henceforth serve as in the manner of a new parish church.

The required grave cause suggesting that the parish church no longer be used for divine worship (cf. c. 1222 §2) arises from the cumulative effect of the following factors:

- As of June 30, 2021, the parish had approximately \$209,000 in unrestricted assets and \$1,048,000 in liabilities, resulting in liabilities more than five times the total amount of unrestricted assets.
- Unless the parish is able to make substantial progress in reducing the debt, the financial burden will continue to impact negatively all areas of parish life.
- According to the real estate assessment, the Olin Street property housing the current church is very marketable, but it would prove much more difficult to sell the parish center, in part simply because of the sheer size of the parish center.
- Although the savings from the annual maintenance costs of the parish church (approximately \$23,000 per year) would be minimal in comparison to the debt, the

¹ ADA stand for *The Americans with Disabilities Act*, a federal law which mandates numerous facility requirements to render buildings accessible to those with special needs.

potential sale of the Olin Street multi-purpose property could go a long way toward helping the parish get back on its feet.

- The current parish church is not ADA compliant, nor can it easily be made so. The parish center is much newer and is already ADA compliant, has ample parking, has adequate space for divine worship, and has space for parish offices and for faith formation programs.
- If the celebration of liturgies were to be transferred to the parish hall, there would no longer be any pastoral need to maintain the current church.

The pastor attests that relegating Saint John the Evangelist church to profane use is not likely to result in any harm to the good of souls (cf. can. 1222 §). All of the sacraments and devotions can be celebrated at the parish center, which will serve in the manner of a parish church until a more permanent solution emerges.

The pastor is aware of the obligation to see to it that Saint John the Evangelist church, if relegated, not be given over to sordid use.

This information was shared with the members of the Presbyteral Council on May 12, 2022. Having considered the matter attentively, the members of the Council unanimously recommended to me that I authorize the transfer of the seat of the parish and grant the petition of the pastor to relegate Saint John the Evangelist church in Girard to profane but not sordid use.

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

Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the best possible means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Saint John the Evangelist parish, while considering that regularly scheduled Sunday Masses have not been celebrated in the parish church since March of 2020; that the obligation of the parish to maintain two separate buildings for divine worship is simply unsustainable; that the anticipated repairs to the parish church would likely double the parish's already substantial long-term debt; that some measure of debt relief from the potential sale of the multi-purpose building housing the parish church and the former school would positively impact almost every aspect of parish life; that there would be no further pastoral need for the current multi-purpose edifice; that the pastor and members of the pastoral council have petitioned for the relegation of the church; that the transfer of the seat of the parish (enacted by separate decree) would render it no longer connected to the multi-purpose building; 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:

Saint John the Evangelist church on Olin Street in Girard is relegated to profane but not sordid use, according to the norm of can. 1222 §2.

Furthermore, the celebration of all sacraments are to be transferred to the parish center on Main Street which is henceforth to serve in the manner of a parish church until a more permanent solution emerges.

This decree is effective on Sunday, July 17, 2022, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 9th day of June, 2022

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor