



PRESBYTERAL COUNCIL MEETING

Catholic Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania

Wednesday, February 26, 2025

St. Mark Catholic Center

10:30am

Members in Attendance in Person:

Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, Very Rev. Andrew M. Boyd, V.F., Rev. Benjamin Daghir, Very Rev. John J. Detisch, V.F., Very Rev. Michael P. Ferrick, V.F., Very Rev. Scott W. Jabo, V.F., Rev. Brandon M. Kleckner, Rev. Matthew J. Kujawinski, Rev. Ian McElrath, Very Rev. Justin P. Pino, V.F., Very Rev. Michael P. Polinek, V.F., Rev. James P. Power, Very Rev. Nicholas J. Rouch, V.G., Rev. Christopher Singer, Rev. Msgr. Richard Siefer, E.V, Very Rev. Richard C. Tomasone, V.F.

Members Excused: Very Rev. V. David Foradori, E.V.

1. The meeting was called to order at 10:30 and began with Mid-morning prayer led by Fr. Pino.
2. Results of Election of Officers
 - a. Fr. Rouch shared the election results as follows:
 - i. Chair – Fr. Scott Jabo
 - ii. Vice-Chair – Fr. John Detisch
 - iii. Secretary – Fr. Ian McElrath
 - b. The new officers took their seats.
 - c. The statutes indicate that the Council year begins July 1 and ends on June 30. These officers hold office until June 30.
3. Review and approval of minutes of the October 3, 2024 and November 6, 2024 meeting.
 - a. A motion was made by Msgr. Siefer and seconded by Fr. McElrath to approve the meetings of the Oct. 3 meeting. The motion carried.
 - b. A motion was made by Fr. Power and seconded by Fr. Boyd to approve the minutes of the Nov. 6 meeting. The motion carried.
4. Diocesan Financial Status
 - a. The update was given by Jim Hubert, CFO.
 - b. Reminder: The Diocese operates on a January to December fiscal year.
 - c. Budget for 2025
 - i. Income: \$8.77 million
 - ii. Expense: \$7.59 million

- iii. Note: Diocese is drawing 7% on investments annually; this is unsustainable.
- d. Projected challenges for 2026
 - i. Need to reduce investment draw from 7% to 5%.
 - ii. Added costs for new propaedeutic year for seminarians.
 - iii. Self-insurance costs for property insurance will likely increase significantly.
 - 1. Note: Insurance premium has increased 19.8% over the last two years; only 9% of that cost passed on to diocesan entities with the diocese covering the rest.
 - 2. Reassessment of all properties in 2024 should help reduce the cost.
 - iv. Priest retirement plan expenses are up; parish assessments for the plan will likely be increased.
- 5. Proposal to amend statutes
 - a. Father Power noted that section 3.3.1 of the current statutes of the Presbyteral Council indicate that “The Bishop will freely appoint up to three (3) members, according to his own prudent disposition.” Fr. Power proposed that section in the statutes be amended to read: “The Bishop will freely appoint members, according to his own prudent disposition.”
 - b. A brief discussion followed.
 - c. Msgr. Siefer made a motion to amend the statutes as recommended by Fr. Power. Fr Detisch seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.
- 6. Relegation of Mount Calvary church, Erie
 - a. Fr. Singer made the presentation.
 - b. Fr. Singer began by reminding the Council of its responsibility in the law to advise the Bishop on the relegation of a church building.
 - c. Fr. Singer gave background on the discussion:
 - i. Mt. Calvary Church was built in the 1970s as an addition to the former parish school building.
 - ii. The previous pastor began investigating the possibility of separating or partitioning Mt. Calvary church from the attached school building.
 - iii. Neither option was possible.
 - d. The proposed grave causes include:
 - i. The number of facilities currently owned by St. James parish;
 - ii. The high cost of repairs needed for the unused facilities at Mount Calvary;
 - iii. The inseparability of the church from the aging school building;
 - iv. The high costs of necessary repairs at other facilities – including St. James and St. Mark churches;
 - v. Operation of the parish in deficit spending.
 - e. Discussion followed on the feedback from parishioners and the local community on the use of the Mount Calvary complex for another purpose

to benefit the neighborhood and its low-income families and underprivileged children.

- f. Father Power asked for further detail about how the Mount Calvary church is impeding St. James parish's ability to exercise its mission.
 - i. Fr. Singer noted the pastor's explanation of:
 - 1. Extreme costs of maintenance;
 - 2. Difficulty in finding maintenance personnel to care for the facility placing a demand on the pastor;
 - 3. The potential damage to the neighborhood from leaving the school building unused and subject to vandalism;
 - g. Discussion followed about the financial status of St. James parish.
 - h. Robust discussion followed about the proposed grave causes.
 - i. A motion was made to recommend to Bishop Persico that Mount Calvary church, Erie, be relegated to profane but not sordid use by Fr. Kujawinski and seconded by Fr. Pino . The motion carried unanimously.
7. Relegation of St. Joseph church, Mount Jewett
- a. Fr. Singer made the presentation.
 - b. Fr. Singer reviewed the proposed grave causes, including:
 - i. The number of properties in St. Elizabeth parish and their distance from one another;
 - ii. The cost of replacing the roof on St. Joseph church;
 - iii. The extreme burden on the pastor of maintaining a secondary church 16 miles distant from the parish church, especially during the winter months;
 - iv. The inability of parishioners who live nearby to assist in caring for the church due to their advanced age.
 - c. Fr. Pino, pastor of a nearby parish, discussed the current state of the town of Mount Jewett and noted its dramatic decline in recent years.
 - d. Fr. McElrath asked if there are easier ways to help the pastor maintain the building that relegating it, including investing in repairs to the buildings.
 - e. Fr. Power asked Fr. Singer to clarify how the law applies to the Mount Jewett case.
 - i. Fr. Singer read from the then-Congregation for Clergy's circular letter on the relegation of churches.
 - f. Fr. Detisch pointed out that Mount Jewett seems to meet all of the potential criteria for relegation mentioned in the letter.
 - g. Fr. Kujawinski and Fr. Power noted that the ministry of the parish seems to be impeded by the heavy burden placed on the pastor.
 - h. A motion to recommend to Bishop Persico that St. Joseph Church, Mount Jewett be relegated to profane but not sordid use was made by Fr. Pino and seconded by Fr. Power. The motion carried unanimously.
8. Center for Spiritual Healing training sessions
- a. Fr. Singer made the presentation.

- b. Background: Following the death of Msgr. James Peterson, Bishop Persico formally established an office to minister to those people experiencing the influence of the demonic.
 - c. Calls from pastors and parishioners about potentially demonic issues have been increasing over several years.
 - d. Fr. Singer is proposing a continuing education day for priests and deacons that will include:
 - i. Overview of theology of angels and demons;
 - ii. How these realities impact our parishioners;
 - iii. What tools pastors already have available to them;
 - iv. What tools the diocese can provide to the pastors;
 - v. What cases should be referred to the diocese.
 - e. Fr. Singer asked about how many meetings should be held and where
 - i. Frs. Boyd and Detisch offered to host.
 - f. Fr. Power asked about the possibility of doing something at Emmaus.
 - g. Fr. Singer believes vicariate-wide meetings might be most beneficial, possibly hosted in Erie, Mercer, and Brockway in the summer or fall.
 - h. Fr. Singer will work with the pastors who offered to host the sessions and will communicate with the presbyterate once dates are set.
9. Update on International Priests
- a. Fr. McElrath gave the update.
 - i. Bishop Persico has received a favorable response from Fr. Paschal's bishop in the Diocese of Ekwulobia, Nigeria, about potentially sending two (2) priests to Erie this year.
 - ii. The backgrounds of the priests look promising and interviews with them will begin soon.
 - iii. Fr. McElrath noted that there is still a long way to go with evaluating candidates and immigration proceedings if the Bishop decides to move forward with these two priests; the earliest anyone could arrive would likely be the fall.
 - iv. Fr. McElrath and Fr. Rouch have also met with a priest friend of Fr. Paschal's who has visited Erie before and is interested in coming to serve here.
 - v. Fr. McElrath met with an African priest with local connections to parishes in Erie who is currently completing Clinical Pastoral Education to be certified as a hospital chaplain; there may be potential to work with him in the future.
 - vi. Fr. McElrath, Fr. Rouch, and Bishop Persico all reiterated that this process is moving along at a deliberate pace and that every effort is being made to ensure only the best candidates for ministry would come to Erie.
 - vii. Bishop Persico reminded the Council that these priests would only serve in Erie for a maximum of five (5) years before returning home.
 - b. Fr. Kleckner asked about the orientation process.

- i. Fr. McElrath reminded the Council that he has proposed a six (6) to eight (8) week orientation with the priests residing at St. Luke's, Erie, with Fr. McElrath.
 - ii. He is interested in adopting a "host family" program with families recommended by pastors who can help meet some of the human needs of the priests who leave their home countries to serve here.
- c. Fr. Rouch encouraged the priests to let the brothers in their deaneries know about how things are proceeding with this process.
- d. Fr. McElrath encouraged any priests to approach him with questions or recommendations.

10. Clarification on transferred holy days of obligation

- a. Fr. Kujawinski gave the update.
- b. The Dicastery for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments has clarified that when a holy day of obligation is transferred to another day, the obligation is abrogated.
- c. The Office for Divine Worship has received observations from a retired priest who is assisting in parishes on weekends about some trouble liturgical practices. Consequently, Fr. Kujawinski made several reminders.
 - i. Priests must use the current editions of the ritual books.
 - ii. Nativity scenes are forbidden from being placed in front of the altar.
 - iii. The word "one" is to be removed from the conclusion of orations immediately.

11. Updates from the Clergy Office

- a. Revision process for the Priest Personnel Policy
 - i. Fr. Rouch gave the update.
 - ii. A committee consisting of Fathers Singer, Jabo, Boyd, Siefer, Pino, and Rouch has met twice to work on updates to the personnel policy.
 - iii. Updates will be provided to the Council as the work continues.
- b. Courage Apostolate
 - i. Fr. McElrath gave the update.
 - ii. Fr. McElrath reminded the Council that Msgr. Ed Lohse began investigating the establishment of Courage several years ago at the request of a layman in the Diocese.
 - iii. A small committee was formed from the Presbyteral Council to investigate the possibility and met a number of times with leadership from the national Courage office in Connecticut and with the Courage chaplain from Pittsburgh.
 - iv. At its last meeting, the committee recommended that Bishop Persico move forward with establishing a chapter of Courage in the Diocese of Erie.
 - v. Bishop Persico has appointed Fr. Mark Hoffman to be the founding chaplain of the apostolate.

- vi. Information will be communicated to the priests about the apostolate, about how to refer parishioners to it. It is hoped that a clergy study day can be held in the Fall with members of the Courage staff from Connecticut.
- vii. A brief discussion of the work of Courage followed.
- c. October Count 2024
 - i. Fr. Rouch gave the update.
 - ii. The October Count was made available publicly in January.
 - iii. The total attendance was about 27,600, a slight decrease from last year.
 - 1. Before the pandemic, the diocesan count was almost 40,000.
 - iv. Many of the significant increases or decreases at individual churches are due to changes in Mass schedules.
 - v. Fr. Rouch asked about the utility of asking for livestream “attendance” as part of the October counts; the Council feels the this information is not pertinent to the October count.
 - vi. Fr. Power asked about the possibility of seeing October Count numbers from 10+ years ago to help parishioners recognize the need for change in parishes.
 - vii. Fr. Pino will check the Archives for the old October Counts.
- d. CSA 2025
 - i. Fr. Rouch reminded the Council that advertisement for the CSA has begun with mailings from OSV and a video released by the Communications Officer.
 - ii. Several pastors have pointed out problems with the mailings:
 - 1. Uninspiring letter
 - 2. Incorrect addresses
 - iii. Fr. Power asked if the bishop has any plans to decrease the overall CSA goal for the Diocese.
 - 1. Bishop Persico pointed out that many parishes are successful with the CSA but that other assessments from the diocese may be evaluated in the future.
- e. Dean Visits
 - i. Fr. Rouch informed the Council that several of the new deans have made unsettling discoveries in their parish visits:
 - 1. Some previous deans had not inspected sacramental books for a number of years.
 - 2. In some limited cases, this allowed parishes to neglect entering accurate data in the sacramental registers for a number of years.
 - 3. Fr. Rouch encouraged the deans to take these visits seriously and to be attentive to the primary goals of the visits, namely:
 - a. To assess the wellbeing of the priest.

- b. To inspect the condition of the churches and other facilities
 - c. To evaluate the condition of the sacramental records
 - f. Email addresses for clergy
 - i. Fr. Rouch asked the deans to remind the priests that the diocese only sends email communications to the official diocesan email addresses.
 - ii. Priests should be checking that email address regularly.
- 12. Deans' Reports
 - a. Dubois Deanery – Fr. John Detisch
 - i. Fr. Detisch asked about mileage payment for deans' visits
 - 1. Bishop Persico proposed that the diocese could consider reimbursing these costs.
 - ii. Some of the priests in the deanery are looking toward finding new uses or owners for parish properties
 - 1. Bishop Persico reminded the Council that pastors and finance councils can explore the sale of parish property on their own, with the caveat that churches must first be relegated. Once the finance council has approved, the pastor must request the Bishop's permission to sell the property.
 - b. St. Marys Deanery – Fr. Justin Pino
 - i. Fr. Pino advised that Ramzi Musallam, a man falsely claiming to be an Orthodox priest or bishop has been spotted in Ridgway and Erie. It is well known that he is *not* a legitimate Orthodox priest or bishop.
 - c. Erie East & West – Frs. Scott Jabo & Michael Ferrick
 - i. Pastors will be collaborating on any needed modifications to the Mass schedules; the diocese will not determine the schedule.
 - ii. The pastors in Erie expressed concern about Catholic identity at the Erie Catholic School System.
 - 1. The Bishop has encouraged them to work together as a pastors' board and with the pastors' representative on the Board of Directors.
 - d. Oil City – Fr. Michael Polinek
 - i. Pastors expressed some confusion and/or concerns over ownership or management of cemeteries.
 - ii. Fr. Rouch said there have been some discussions at the diocesan level about resources that could be offered to help pastors run cemeteries more effectively but that these discussions were only in the brainstorming stage
- 13. Other Business
 - a. Ministry Platform
 - i. Fr. Kujawinski pointed out several problems with the mailings for CSA, including that every Catholic institution in Erie County received a solicitation from St. Boniface parish, Erie.

- ii. A large number of other pastors on the Council expressed similar concerns with CSA related to mailings and Ministry Platform data.
 - iii. Bishop Persico expressed a strong desire to resolve the ongoing problems with Ministry Platform soon. He wants a group from Presbyteral Council to meet with Kathy Papalia and Deacon Frank Hannah to discuss the issues.
- b. Priest Social Committee
 - i. The ad hoc committee on priestly fraternity met and sketched out a possible calendar for 2025 including
 - 1. An event in Erie in May.
 - 2. A picnic in Brockway on Labor Day
 - 3. A golf event in the Shenango Valley in August
 - 4. Fr. Kujawinski also noted that Fr. Dan Hoffman is working on organizing trips to baseball games
- c. Confirmation Mass and Obligations
 - i. Fr. Tomasone asked if the Confirmation ritual Mass on Sunday fulfills the obligation.
 - ii. The canon lawyers on the Council assured him that it does.

14. Future Meetings

Wednesday May 7, 2025 – St. Mark Catholic Center (note revised location)
 Thursday, September 18, 2025 – Beloved Disciple Church, Grove City
 Wednesday, November 19, 2025 – St. Mark Catholic Center

15. Adjournment

- a. A motion was made by Msgr. Siefer at 2:53 to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Fr. Power. The motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,
 Rev. Ian McElrath