



## PRESBYTERAL COUNCIL MEETING

Catholic Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania

Thursday, September 18, 2025

Beloved Disciple Parish, Grove City

10:30am

### **Members in Attendance in Person:**

Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, Very Rev. Andrew M. Boyd, V.F., Rev. Benjamin Dagher, Very Rev. John J. Detisch, V.F., Very Rev. V. David Foradori, E.V., 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, Rev. James P. Power, Very Rev. Nicholas J. Rouch, V.G., Rev. Msgr. Richard Siefer, E.V, Rev. Christopher Singer, Very Rev. Richard C. Tomasone, V.F.

### **Members Excused:** Very Rev. Michael P. Ferrick, V.F

1. The meeting was called to order at 10:29 and began with Mid-morning prayer.
2. Election of Officers for the 2025-26 year
  - a. Fr. Rouch gave the update.
  - b. 8 of 9 nominations recommended retaining the current slate of officers.
  - c. Fr. Rouch asked the Council to vote on retaining the current slate.
  - d. Slate
    - i. Fr. Jabo, Chair
    - ii. Fr. J. Detisch, Vice-Chair
    - iii. Fr. McElrath, Secretary
  - e. The Council unanimously re-elected the current slate of officers for another term.
3. Status of election/appointment of new Dean of Oil City Deanery
  - a. Fr. Rouch gave the update.
  - b. An election is underway to replace Fr. Michael Polinek (transferred to West Erie Deanery)
  - c. Two candidates have been nominated
  - d. A ballot will be sent to the priests of the Deanery shortly.
  - e. Bishop Persico has asked Fr. Polinek to remain on Council
4. Review and approval of minutes of May 7, 2025 meeting
  - a. Fr. Jabo led the review.
  - b. Msgr. Siefer made a motion to approve the minutes as read. Fr. Foradori seconded the motion. All members present voted in favor of approving the minutes as read, save Fr. Singer, who abstained due to absence at the previous meeting. The motion carried.

5. St. Marys Deanery planning
  - a. Deacon Marty Eisert updated the Council on this process.
  - b. He reminded the Council of the timeline of planning under Bishop Persico since 2014, underlining the Bishop's emphasis on providing the best possible pastoral care to the people of the Diocese.
  - c. He also reminded the Council that the pastors of St. Marys Deanery initiated the local planning process last year by contacting Msgr. Siefer.
  - d. Progress
    - i. Msgr. Siefer has interviewed each pastor.
    - ii. A preliminary report on the status of the Deanery has been given to the Bishop.
    - iii. On Thursday, Oct 9, parish pastoral and finance councils will receive information from the report and will be invited to participate in the planning process.
    - iv. Once parish plans are formulated and reviewed, Msgr. Siefer and Deacon Marty will host a meeting with the parish leadership to discuss their proposals.
    - v. Final plans will be approved by the Bishop, who will send them to the pastors for implementation.
    - vi. Implementation is expected in late 2026.
  - e. Questions & Discussion
    - i. Msgr. Siefer reports that most of the priests in the Deanery have received the discussion favorably.
    - ii. Fr. Pino shared that gossip and misinformation has already begun to spread about this process but that the younger parishioners who speak with him recognize the wisdom of and need for planning.
    - iii. Fr. Pino also shared that parishes have already begun organically networking and sharing staff resources, faith formation, and social functions with a recognition that communities can "survive together or die alone."
    - iv. Fr. Detisch asked if the Archabbot is aware of the planning process. Bishop Persico state that he has informed the Archabbot.
    - v. Bishop Persico also shared that the priests in the Deanery seem to recognize the inevitability of parish changes but those who are nearing retirement would prefer that the changes be deferred for several years.
    - vi. Fr. McElrath suggested that it is important to be cognizant of the risk of building resentments between older and younger clergy based on willingness/unwillingness to make change.
    - vii. Fr. Jabo observed that the October Count speaks very clearly of the need for change in the St. Marys Deanery as well as in the other parts of the Diocese.
    - viii. Msgr. Siefer and Fr. Pino have shared Mass attendance data with the pastors in the area who have received it "somerly."

- ix. Fr. Rouch encouraged Fr. Pino to share his observations and thoughts about planning clearly and honestly at the planning meeting on October 9.
- x. A brief discussion followed about the difficulty of getting people to recognize the bigger picture of the Diocese.
- xi. Fr. Power asked about pastoral planning at the level of the Diocesan administrative offices.
  - 1. Deacon Marty noted that a number of changes have in fact been made in the administrative offices and that the process will inevitably continue.
  - 2. Fr. Kujawinski observed that changes at the Diocesan administrative level have probably not been communicated to the pastors effectively.
  - 3. Fr. Kujawinski also noted that a report on staffing numbers at in the Diocesan offices over time might be helpful.
  - 4. Fr. Singer noted that such a report could be difficult because cultural changes/changing needs (e.g., protection of children, IT) have changed staffing requirements.
  - 5. Fr. Polinek suggested that there may be some way to share an organizational chart with the pastors.
  - 6. A brief discussion followed on the importance of fiscal responsibility at both the parish and financial levels.
    - a. Fr. Power suggested that major budget cuts at the diocesan level would demonstrate fiduciary diligence to donors.
    - b. Fr. Foradori noted that the cost salaries and benefits can make cuts difficult.
    - c. Fr. Kujawinski noted that his parish has cut \$100,000 from the budget in the past year and that it has been difficult but necessary.

#### 6. Pastoral Planning Data Review

- a. Fr. Rouch and Fr. McElrath presented the data.
- b. Major point: there has been 66% October Count drop in last 24 years.
- c. Fr. Rouch and Fr. McElrath noted several trends
  - i. The decline in attendance is consistent throughout the regions of the Diocese
  - ii. There are no “smoking guns” indicating problems in certain areas

#### 7. Relegation of Churches

- a. Fr. Singer is working to put resources in place to help pastors understand the relegation process and to evaluate their potential requests.
- b. A team of Fr. Chris Singer, Fr. Joe Petrone, and Maria Caulfield will work to assist the parish in answering questions, etc.
  - i. One of these three will be designated as the parish contact person.
  - ii. An informational presentation has been created to help pastors and parishioners to understand the process.

## 8. Upcoming Relegation Requests

- a. Fr. Glover has approached the Chancery about relegating Holy Family Church.
  - i. It is anticipated that the Council's recommendation on this may be sought in November.
- b. Fr. Joe Petrone is working closely with Fr. Jeff Lucas in Meadville to continue the analysis of St. Bridget church.

## 9. Diocesan matters – *Fr. Rouch*

- a. Episcopal Transition
  - i. Bishop Perisco will submit his resignation to the Holy Father on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in November.
  - ii. We do not know when the resignation will be accepted and a new bishop appointed.
  - iii. Planning is underway for the transition process.
- b. Eucharistic Revival and Congress in preparation for diocese' 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary
  - i. Public announcements about the initiative will be made in January.
  - ii. Pastors and parish staff should be attentive to this matter.
- c. Official mailing address for St. Mark Catholic Center - Elimination of P.O. Box
  - i. Remember to update parish address books as soon as possible.

## 10. Investigation of St. Jude Parish financial management

- a. Bishop Persico gave the update.
- b. He noted two important lessons:
  - i. Policies on Finance Councils had to be ignored for this to happen.
  - ii. The issues at St. Jude's extended far beyond the car raffle.
- c. Questions of criminal charges are not expected to be settled until 2026.
- d. Bishop Persico and Fr. Rouch noted that in January, the Bishop was informed only about problems with the car raffle but other questions raised by the DA were not immediately communicated to the Bishop.
- e. The ongoing forensic audit is being complicated by questions of custody of evidence and information.
- f. Fr. Rouch noted that there were three different problems at St. Jude:
  - i. The botched car raffle
  - ii. Questions about extravagant spending of parish funds
  - iii. Questions about potential misappropriation of parish funds
- g. Discussions
  - i. Fr. Detisch asked about financial oversight from the diocesan offices
  - ii. Fr. Kujawinski informed the Council that when he was temporary administrator of a parish in 2020, he informed the Finance Office of irregularities with parish reports and finance council meetings but he was instructed not to pursue the matter by the Finance office.
  - iii. Fr. McElrath noted a similar experience in Oil City in 2019.

- iv. Fr. Power observed that his parish had been operating at 60k annual deficit for years under his predecessor and that the Diocesan Finance Office doesn't seem to have raised any questions about this.
- v. Fr. Dagher noted a need for training for clergy and finance council chairs on diocesan policy.
  - 1. Bishop Persico would like to have an online program for pastors and finance council chairs.
  - 2. Fr. Power recommended an annual presentation for members of finance councils
- vi. A discussion of careful implementation of diocesan financial policies followed.
  - 1. Bishop Persico noted that the auditor observed that the policies in place are very good but were not followed at St. Jude.

#### 11. Parish finance responsibilities

- a. Bishop Persico presented several new financial policies he would like to promulgate.
- b. Proposed New Policies
  - i. Oath of Office for Finance Council
    - 1. The Bishop presented a proposed oath of office of finance council members
    - 2. Fr. McElrath proposed that the oath be made annually as an opportunity to review the policy as we do with mandated reporter documents.
  - ii. Presenting Policies
    - 1. Every Finance Council member will receive complete policies when taking the oath.
    - 2. All policies are available on the website but are scattered across documents.
    - 3. Fr. McElrath will work with Fr. Rouch to ensure all policies are accessible in a single place on the website.
  - iii. All members of the finance council will sign an annual letter to Bishop attesting that at least four meetings of the council were held.
- c. Discussion followed on the following matters:
  - i. The difficulty of finding things on the diocesan website.
  - ii. Need sample appointment letters
  - iii. The possibility of producing a video for the website explaining the role of the finance council.
  - iv. The need for easily accessible instructions on reporting financial mismanagement
  - v. The need for a procedural manual for pastors on working with finance councils.

#### 12. Catholic Services Appeal

- a. Fr. Rouch gave the update.
- b. 2025 results
  - i. Overall, parishes have reached 130% of diocesan goals
  - ii. 14 parishes have not yet reached 90% of pledges
- c. 2025 donor receptions
  - i. Best Practice
    - 1. Top donors will be invited to receptions with the Bishop
    - 2. Pastors will also be invited
  - ii. Schedule of receptions
    - 1. *November 5 (St. Tobias, Brockway)*
    - 2. *November 6 (St. Mark Catholic Center, Erie)*
- d. CSA 2026
  - i. Planning is underway
  - ii. Theme will probably focus on the Pope's episcopal motto

### 13. Updates and questions regarding Ministry Platform

- a. Fr. Singer gave the update.
- b. Fr. Singer reminded the Council that in February 2025, the Council discussed a number of concerns that were raised about Ministry Platforms.
- c. Fr. Singer and the Chancery staff have investigated some of these concerns and observed the following
  - i. No systemic issues were identified
  - ii. Some parish database errors have been identified and corrected
  - iii. Recent updates to Ministry Platform complicated Batch Manager functions, and the vendor is working to correct this problem.
- d. Msgr. Siefer asked if parishes can report Sacramental data to the Diocese through MP yet
  - i. Fr. Singer said this will hopefully be functional by 2026
- e. Fr. Singer reminded the Deans that Canon Law requires the physical sacramental records to be kept up; Ministry Platform does not replace these.
- f. Discussion followed about the Ministry Platform training opportunities available to parish staff

### 14. Update regarding International Priests

- a. We are anticipating the arrival of two priests from the Diocese of Ekwulobia in early 2026.
- b. Fr. McElrath is working to ensure a smooth transition of the priests to American culture and parish life.

### 15. Update from the Office for Divine Worship

- a. The new Order for Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick can be ordered. It can be used optionally starting February 2 and will become mandatory on Easter.
- b. The Order of Christian Burial has been updated to reflect the language the Missal and can be ordered.
- c. New Liturgy of the Hours *may* be ready for Advent 2026.

- d. Prayer for a New Bishop is expected to be ready in time for our next meeting.
16. Update from St. Mark Seminary & Vocation Office
- a. Fr. Jabo provided the Council with a list of diocesan seminarians.
  - b. He provided a list of upcoming vocations events, including:
    - i. Called By Name initiative
    - ii. Rhonda Gurenwald from Vocation Ministry will present at Spring Priests' Day of Recollection
    - iii. Quo Vadis Days
    - iv. Discernment Weekends
      - 1. December 6-7 for College-aged men
      - 2. March 28-29 for High School and College-aged men
  - c. He also reported that we anticipate up to 6 men from Erie, Buffalo, and Kalamazoo entering St. Mark Seminary next year.
  - d. Four men are in the process of actively discerning seminary for the Diocese of Erie.
  - e. The Vocations Office is working on opportunities for young women to interact with young sisters from religious communities.
    - i. Fr. McElrath asked that the high school chaplains be kept in the loop on this initiative
  - f. Fr. Pino asked for information on the men's experience of Propaedeutic Year
    - i. Fr. Jabo reported that the Erie and Buffalo men from the Baltimore program have spoken very highly of the program and its focus on human and spiritual formation.
    - ii. Fr. Jabo has been very pleased with what the men are receiving in that program.
    - iii. The men from other dioceses who went to the St. Charles Borromeo, Philadelphia, had positive experiences but have also identified some areas for improvement in that program.
  - g. Bishop Persico noted the importance of the Propaedeutic Year in an era of delayed adolescence.
  - h. Bishop Persico also noted that another upcoming change will be that transitional deacons will spend a full year in the parish before ordination to the priesthood.
    - i. Mentor pastors for these deacons will be carefully selected and trained.
  - i. Fr. McElrath asked for a clarification of the timeline. Fr. Jabo explained it as follows:
    - i. 1 year Propaedeutic
    - ii. 2-4 years Discipleship (formerly College & Pre-Theology)
    - iii. 4 years of Theology
    - iv. Diaconate at end of Theology
    - v. Minimum 6 months in parish as a deacon before presbyteral ordination

1. Michael Geary would be our first seminarian to follow this timeline.
- j. Discussion followed about the dramatic cultural changes that play a role in discernment for seminarians today

## 17. Updates from Fr. Rouch

### a. Clergy Office

#### i. Revisions for *Priest Personnel Policy*

1. A committee has been working on this process.
2. The work has been delayed by Fr. Rouch's surgery in June.
3. The plan is to schedule a virtual meeting before November in order to go through the policy paragraph-by-paragraph.

#### ii. Pet policy for priests living in parish/diocesan properties

1. Experience indicates a pet policy is needed before we complete the entire revision process.
2. An updated proposal for a pet policy was presented to the Council.
3. Robust discussion followed of the proposed policy, point-by-point.
4. Fr. Kujawinski reminded the Council that 50% of the members of the committee that drafted this policy own pets.
5. Fr. Pino made a motion to approve the policy as written pending legal review of Section IV. The motion was seconded by Fr. Power. The motion carried unanimously.

#### iii. Continuing formation

1. Spring Day of Recollection must be rescheduled. Date TBD.

#### iv. New Pastors Seminar

1. The Diocese tries to give each new pastor an opportunity to go to a workshop.
2. Feedback has been that they are good but expensive and lack particularity to the Diocese of Erie.
3. Fr. Rouch would like to run something locally.
  - a. Msgr. Siefer has formulated an agenda for a 1 ½ day seminar.
  - b. It will be tailored to the Diocese of Erie.
4. Fr. Polinek asked about opening the seminar to other pastors to refresh their memories and have questions answered.

5. Anyone with suggestions for topics should contact Fr. Rouch

### b. Vicar General

#### i. Deans' annual visits to parishes/priests

1. Many deans have already started their annual visits.
2. Vicars need to remember to conduct the visitation for the Deans in their Vicariates.
3. Fr. Boyd proposed an update to the Dean visit form:

- a. Form currently asks “How are your Mass Intentions recorded?”
- b. Form should require Dean to inspect and initial the Mass Intention book.
- ii. Mileage reimbursement for dean visits.
  1. Bishop Persico has approved reimbursement for mileage accrued on official dean business through the Diocese.

## 18. Deans' reports

- a. Dubois Deanery – Fr. Detisch
  - i. Crisis of Clergy Personnel
    1. Fr. Schmolt has too many churches.
    2. Fr. Detisch is struggling to get Curwensville & Grampian covered.
    3. It is unfair to rely on retired men.
    4. Something needed
      - a. Sunday Service in Absence of Priest?
      - b. Could larger parish in Erie send priests to help?
    5. Bishop Persico noted that the people are capable of traveling to the next church if a priest is unavailable in their church/parish.
    6. Fr. Kujawinski noted that nobody will be deprived of Sunday Eucharist by this situation.
    7. Fr. Polinek proposed that for emergency situations a service without Communion could be conducted by a deacon or lay person.
    8. The Bishop suggested that Fr. Detisch consider moving to a single Mass at the parish church for St. Timothy parish.

## 19. Future meetings:

Wednesday, November 19, 2025 – St. Mark Catholic Center

## 20. Upcoming Dates

- Fall Priests' Day of Recollection – October 8, 2025 Presenter: Fr. John Beal
  - Location: Good Shepherd, West Middlesex
- Webinar for Pastors – Fundraising 101
  - Tuesday, November 4, 3:00 – 4:00pm
  - Presenter: Joannie Lewis, Our Sunday Visitor
- Spring Priests' Day of Recollection – *Date TBD*, 2026
  - Presenter: Rhonda Gruenewald
  - Location: Cross Creek Resort
- Emmaus Convocation
  - June 22-25, 2026
  - St. Vincent College and SpringHill Suites, Latrobe, PA

Presenter: Archbishop Bernard Hebda, Archbishop of St. Paul and  
Minneapolis

21. Adjournment

- a. A motion was made by Msgr. Siefer to adjourn the meeting at 3:07. The motion was seconded by Fr. Detisch. The motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Rev. Ian McElrath