



12.13.2020

## Vatican rejects merger appeal

On Wednesday, Dec. 9, Father John Miller, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Oil City, received notice that the Congregation for Clergy at the Vatican has denied the appeal made by a number of parishioners against the merger of St. Stephen and St. Joseph parishes.

The merger of St. Stephen Parish into St. Joseph Parish was the result of a decree issued by The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, on Dec. 13, 2019. The decree, which took effect on Jan. 1, 2020, was issued at the request of the pastor as the result of a planning and consultation process that was led by parishioners of the Catholic community in Oil City.

A group of parishioners represented by Connie Schwabenbauer of Oil City then asked the Congregation for Clergy to overturn the decree and reinstate two separate Catholic parish communities. The congregation formally rejected the request in the decree dated Nov. 20, 2020.

"I know that the congregation's decision will be disappointing to some parishioners," said Father Miller, "but it is important that we find our source of unity in Jesus Christ and recommit ourselves wholeheartedly to the work of proclaiming the Gospel here in Venango County with a firm foundation

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under our feet and a plan for the long-term sustainability of our mission.”

The decision by the Congregation for Clergy will have no impact on the physical building of St. Stephen Church, a secondary mission church of St. Joseph Parish. St. Stephen Church continues to be an active church building and is currently used for Mass each weekend and for occasional funerals, baptisms and weddings.

In a separate communication this week, Bishop Persico was notified by the Congregation for Clergy that Ms. Schwabenbauer also has submitted a request for hierarchical recourse against the decree he issued July 19, 2020, relegating Our Lady, Help of Christians Church to profane but not sordid use. Our Lady, Help of Christians is another secondary church of St. Joseph Parish, but without mission status, meaning it is not used on a regular basis.

While parish administrators say they are optimistic about the possibility of collaborating with partners to repurpose the unused church building for service to the poorest members of the community, they respect the right of a parishioner to make the appeal.

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