



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT TERESA OF AVILA PARISH (UNION CITY) INTO SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE PARISH (CORRY)

History

A. Saint Teresa of Avila Parish, Union City

The history of Saint Teresa of Avila goes back to 1857, when twenty families built a church in Union Mills and petitioned for it to be erected as a parish. Fr. Thomas Lonnergan, the founding pastor, was based in Corry and also built the first Catholic churches in seven other towns along the railroad. A second, larger church was built in Union City in 1860. The parish ran a school from 1874 to 1901, by which time the town name had changed to Union City. The current church was dedicated in 1907. Saint Teresa Parish established the mission of Our Lady of Fatima at Canadohta Lake in 1950, to offer Mass for seasonal residents and visitors during the summer. Saint Teresa of Avila Parish was partnered with Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Corry in 2019.

B. Saint Thomas Parish, Corry

Fr. Thomas Lonnergan was appointed in 1855 to care for the Catholics along the Erie and Sunbury (later P&E) Railroad from Union Mills to Kane. In 1861, the junction with the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad was completed and the city of Corry grew up around the junction. Fr. Lonnergan built the first Saint Thomas church in Corry in 1862. He also built his rectory in Corry, while at the same time serving as pastor of churches in Kane, Warren, Titusville, Tidioute, Irvington and Garland, and Union Mills. Saint Thomas church was expanded in 1864 and 1868, and finally the current church was built and dedicated in 1885. The parish operated a school from 1894 to 2015. Saint Thomas Parish also ran the mission of Our Lady of Victory in Spartansburg from 1906 until 1987, when it was transferred to the care of Saint Elizabeth Parish, also in Corry. Our Lady of Victory closed in 2008. Saint Thomas and Saint Elizabeth Parishes were partnered from 1998 until 2019, when Saint Elizabeth merged into Saint Thomas.

Current Situation

Both Saint Teresa of Avila Parish, Union City, and Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, Corry, are located in southeastern Erie County – just north of the border with Crawford County. Our Lady of Fatima church in Canadohta Lake is just south of the Erie – Crawford County line. Regarding sacred edifices, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish possesses one church building. St. Teresa of Avila Parish possesses 2 church buildings: St. Teresa church in Union City and Our Lady of Fatima church building in Canadohta Lake. The Saint Thomas and Saint Teresa church buildings are 12 miles apart. Our Lady of Fatima church in Canadohta Lake is 8 miles from Saint Teresa church in Union City and 16 miles from Saint Thomas church in Corry.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Erie County peaked at 281,502 around the year 2012. By 2022, the county population had fallen to 267,689 – a drop of 4.9%. The population of Crawford County peaked in 2001 at 90,105. By 2022, it had fallen to 82,670 – a decline of about 8% during that 21-year period. Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish also includes two rural townships in western Warren County.

The population of Union City peaked around 1960 at 3,800 residents. By 2022, the population had declined 24% to about 2,880 persons. The population of Corry peaked around 1950 at 7911 residents. By 2022, it had fallen to 6,120 – a drop of over 22%.

The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been much steeper than the decline in the general population. Saint Teresa of Avila Parish reported 620 registered parishioners in 2015 and 267 in 2022 – a drop of more than 56%. The October count (which records average Mass attendance) for 2015 was 263 and in 2023 it was 190. This indicates a 27% decline in Mass attendance over the last 8 years. In 2015 Saint Teresa of Avila Parish reported 8 infant baptisms. This declined to 4 in the 2022-2023 fiscal year.

Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish reported 741 members in 2015 and 667 in 2023 – a drop of nearly 10%. The October count dropped from 229 in 2015 to 115 in 2023 – a decline of about 49%. In 2015, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish reported 4 infant baptisms. In 2023 it reported 2 infant baptisms.

Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thomas the Apostle Parishes have been partnered since 2019 with notable collaboration between the two developing during those years. Mass times have changed between the two parishes. As a result, it is more accurate to look at the Mass attendance trends by combining both parishes. In that case, the total reported Mass attendance in 2015 was 492 and in 2023 was 305 – a combined decline of 38%. Please note: Saint Elizabeth Parish merged into Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in 2019. From 2015 – 2019 Saint Elizabeth statistics are not included in numbers for Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish.

The general population decline in Erie, Crawford and Warren Counties, as well as the decline in Union City and Corry specifically, combined with a more dramatic decline in the Catholic population in Corry and Union City – as well as the decreasing number of available priests –

necessitates a reconfiguration of parishes and better use of resources in order to properly provide for the care of souls in that tri-county area.

The Diocese of Erie's comprehensive pastoral planning process began in 2014. In the years that followed, vicariate and deanery meetings were held throughout the diocese to gather information and ideas from pastors, parish leaders and parishioners in general. As the conditions in the East Erie Deanery changed in recent years, the need for parish reconfiguration became more necessary.

Beginning in roughly 2018, a directed study of the demographics, and Catholic needs, in Erie County was undertaken. Population trend data was projected by the Meitler firm. Meetings with pastors and parishioners also took place on the local level. On June 22, 2023, Bishop Persico presented a preliminary plan for parish reconfiguration in Erie County (which includes both the East and West Erie Deaneries) to the Presbyteral Council and opened it up for discussion among members.

On August 29, 2023, at a meeting held at St. Mark Catholic Center, Bishop Persico unveiled the Erie County preliminary plan to the pastors of the deanery and a representative group of lay leaders from each parish. The unveiling of the preliminary plan was preceded by three letters written by Bishop Persico which were read to parishioners (and published on the diocesan website) explaining the need for pastoral planning in Erie County and inviting the prayer and participation of all parishioners. Following the August 29 meeting, the Bishop then opened a several-week period of comment and feedback for pastors and people to give their views on the proposed changes.

The preliminary plan proposed that Saint Teresa of Avila Parish (along with its secondary mission church of Our Lady of Fatima in Canadohta Lake) be merged into Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish. Saint Thomas the Apostle church would become the parish church; Saint Teresa of Avila church would become a secondary mission church (i.e. with Mass on Saturday evening or on Sundays); and Our Lady of Fatima church would become a secondary church without mission status (i.e. no Mass on Saturday evening or on Sundays).

After receiving feedback from parishioners and extensive consultation with the pastors of the area, the preliminary plan for these two parishes remained unchanged.

At the February 28, 2024, meeting of the Presbyteral Council, Bishop Persico presented the revised proposal for parish reconfiguration for Erie County. The Presbyteral Council unanimously approved the proposal to merge Saint Teresa of Avila Parish, Union City, into Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, Corry.

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 Erie County, while also considering the challenges presented by demographic decline and the reduced number of priests; the genuine desire on the part of parishioners and clergy alike to realign parish structures to best situate them for

building a strong future; and envisioning this merger as an integral part of the overall pastoral plan Erie County¹; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Teresa of Avila Parish, Union City, shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, Corry.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Teresa of Avila Parish shall be kept at the offices of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Teresa of Avila Parish shall be transferred to Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Thomas the Apostle church.
6. Saint Teresa of Avila church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint Thomas the Apostle 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 Teresa of Avila church.
7. Our Lady of Fatima church shall become a secondary church without mission status. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is no longer permitted in Our Lady of Fatima church.
8. Our Lady of Fatima church is to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214).
9. Furthermore, as required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in each church every year on the solemnity of that 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.

¹ The pastoral plan for Erie County includes the following goals: to 1) create a more vibrant Catholic community, 2) improve Mass attendance and participation in parish life, 3) engage younger Catholics, 4) reach out to fallen-away Catholics and new parishioners, 5) increase the parishes' community and ecumenical involvement, 6) create a more welcoming environment, and 7) sustain the parishes financially.

10. Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish shall be territorial in nature, with boundaries as follows:

Beginning in Warren County, include Columbus and Spring Creek Townships; where the southern border of Spring Creek Township meets the Warren/Crawford County line, continue west in Crawford County along the Sparta/Rome township line to PA Route 89; northwest on PA Route 89 to PA Route 77; southwest on PA Route 77 to the Bloomfield/Athens township line; west on the Bloomfield/Athens township line; north on the Bloomfield/Rockdale township line to the Crawford/Erie County line; east on the Crawford/Erie County line to Union-LeBoeuf Rd. (the Union/LeBoeuf township line); north on the Union/LeBoeuf township line and continuing north on the Amity/Waterford township line to the Amity/Venango township line; east on the Amity/Venango township line to the Pennsylvania/New York state line; continuing east on the Pennsylvania/New York state line to the northeast corner of Columbus Township in Warren County, Pennsylvania.

This decree is effective July 9, 2024. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 11th day of April, 2024

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor