



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF MOUNT CALVARY PARISH AND SAINT MARK THE EVANGELIST PARISH INTO SAINT JAMES PARISH (ERIE)

History

A. Saint James Parish, Erie

The parish community of Saint James in Erie began in 1921. Early parishioners met at first in a pool room until the first church was built in 1922. The current limestone church was dedicated in 1949. The parish then bought property across the street from the church and opened St. James School in 1957.

B. Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish, Erie (Lawrence Park)

Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish was established in 1938 in Lawrence Park. The first Mass was celebrated in the auditorium of Saint Mary Episcopal Mission, close to where the Catholic church would be built. Work began on the church complex in 1940, but progress was slow. At Easter 1942 the parish began celebrating Mass in the partially constructed social hall, but in July of that year a fire swept through it. Although it was not fully finished, the first Mass was celebrated in the church proper for Christmas 1942. Presently, the entire complex, including the church, social hall, and rectory, are constructed in a single cruciform unit.

C. Mount Calvary Parish, Erie

Archbishop John Mark Gannon established a number of parishes in Erie to accommodate the growing population after the Second World War. One of these was Mount Calvary, established on December 13, 1951, for the northeast section of the city. For the first few years, Sunday Mass was celebrated at Sunset Inn, and daily Mass at Saint Mark the Evangelist church. The parish social groups and religious education programs were fully functioning long before the church/social hall was finally completed in 1954. Mount Calvary then opened a school, staffed by the Sisters of St. Benedict, initially serving grades 1-4 with no tuition. The school quickly expanded to include all the elementary grades. It eventually closed in 2004. The church, which doubled as a social hall, was partially destroyed by a fire in 1975. The parish then decided not only to restore the hall, but to build a separate church. The current church was dedicated in 1977.



Current Situation

Presently, Saint James is a stand-alone parish, while Saint Mark the Evangelist and Mount Calvary Parishes have been partnered since 2017. All three of these parishes are located on the Eastern edge of the City of Erie and in Lawrence Park – all in Erie County. Mount Calvary and St. Mark the Evangelist churches are 1.8 miles and 1.7 miles, respectively, from Saint James church. Regarding sacred edifices, Mount Calvary Parish possesses a church attached to a school building which currently is leased to a private institution. Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish possesses a church which is attached to a school/education center and office space. The rectory is also attached to the church/school complex. Saint James Parish possesses a stand-alone church building. Saint James Parish also possesses Saint James School building – which is currently leased and used by the Erie Catholic School system.

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 the City of Erie peaked at 138,440 around the year 1960. By the year 2000, the City had approximately 103,748 residents. In 2021, that number had dropped to 93,999 – a decline of 32% since its 1960 peak. The population Lawrence Park has declined from 4,048 in the year 2000, to 3,821 in the year 2020 – according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This is a decline of just over 5% in two decades.

The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been much steeper than the decline in the general population. Mount Calvary Parish reported 372 registered parishioners in 2015 and 168 in 2023 – a drop of 54%. The October count Mass attendance estimate for 2015 was 244 and in 2023 it was 56. This indicates a 77% decline in Mass attendance over the last 8 years. In 2015, Mount Calvary Parish reported 3 infant baptisms. This declined to 0 in the 2022-2023 fiscal year.

Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish reported 1,140 members in 2015 and 563 in 2023 – a drop of 50%. The October count dropped from 257 in 2015 to 144 in 2023 – a decline of about 44%. In 2015, St. Mark the Evangelist Parish reported 14 infant baptisms. This declined to 1 infant baptism in 2023.

Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist Parishes have been partnered since 2017 with notable collaboration between the two developing during those years. Masses have consolidated and Mass times have changed. 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 501 and in 2023 was 300 – a combined decline of 40%.

Saint James Parish reported 2,813 registered parishioners in 2015 and 2,029 in 2023 – a drop of more than 27%. In 2015 the October count reported 1,461 and in 2023 it was 994. This is a decline of 32% in average Mass attendance over the last 8 years. In 2015 Saint James Parish reported 45 infant baptisms. In fiscal year 2022-2023 this number was 20 – a decline of about 55% over the 8 year period. However, 20 infant baptisms a year is a very healthy sacramental statistic for the Diocese of Erie.

The general population decline in the City of Erie, combined with a more dramatic decline in the Catholic population in the neighborhoods of Mount Calvary, Saint Mark the Evangelist, and Saint James parishes – 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 on the East side of the City of Erie and in the Lawrence Park 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 the City of Erie 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 in Erie, 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 Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist Parishes be merged into Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Harborcreek. The result would be that Our Lady of Mercy church would become the parish church, Saint Mark the Evangelist would become a secondary mission church, and Mount Calvary church would become a secondary church without mission status (i.e. no Mass Saturday evening or on Sundays).

After receiving feedback from parishioners and extensive consultation with the pastors of the area, the preliminary plan was changed to the following: Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist parishes would merge into Saint James Parish with St. James church being the parish church, Saint Mark the Evangelist becoming a secondary mission church (Saturday and Sunday Mass permitted) and Mount Calvary becoming a secondary church without mission status.

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 Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist Parishes into Saint James Parish with Saint Mark the Evangelist church becoming a secondary mission church, and Mount Calvary becoming a secondary church.

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 the East side of the City of Erie, 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 for the City of Erie and Erie County¹; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Mount Calvary Parish, Erie, and Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish, Lawrence Park, shall be merged and subsumed into Saint James Parish, Erie.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint James Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist parishes shall be kept at the offices of Saint James Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Mount Calvary and Saint Mark the Evangelist parishes shall be transferred to Saint James Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint James church.
6. Saint Mark the Evangelist church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint James 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 Mark the Evangelist church.
7. Mount Calvary 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 Mount Calvary church.
8. Mount Calvary 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 James Parish shall be territorial in nature, with boundaries as follows:

In Erie, beginning on the lakeshore at the northeast corner of Lakeside Cemetery: south on Cranch Road to East Lake Road/PA Route 5; east on East Lake Road to Downing Avenue; south on Downing Avenue to the Norfolk Southern Railway Company railroad track; west on the railroad track to the Bayfront Connector/state highway 290; east on the Bayfront Connector to Shannon Road; south on Shannon Road and continuing west on Norcross Road to Martin Road; south on Martin Road to Interstate 90; east on Interstate 90 to Clark Road; north on Clark Road to Buffalo Road/ PA Route 20; west on Buffalo Road to Walbridge Road; north on Walbridge Road to the lakeshore; west along the lakeshore to Lakeside Cemetery.

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