



DECREE

MERGING SAINT AGATHA, SAINT BRIGID, AND SAINT MARY OF GRACE PARISHES AND ESTABLISHING THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD PARISH (MEADVILLE)

History

Pastoral care for the Catholic faithful of the Meadville area began with the establishment of Saint Hippolyte parish in Frenchtown. The parish was first organized in 1837 under the Diocese of Philadelphia and encompassed not only the Frenchtown and Cochran area but all of the Meadville area as well. The first resident pastor, Father Marc Antoine de la Rocque, was appointed in 1845 for Frenchtown and the Meadville area.

As best as can be determined, this canonical situation was never officially changed, so that even today the territorial parish technically having responsibility for the Meadville area remains Saint Hippolyte parish. It should be noted, however, that the last known traces of any sense of Saint Hippolyte parish having pastoral responsibility for Meadville area Catholics ceased well over a century ago. Instead, beginning in the mid-1800's, pastoral care for Catholics in Meadville has been exercised by Saint Agatha, Saint Brigid, and Saint Mary of Grace parishes, all of which are technically personal parishes for Catholics of German, Irish, and Italian heritage respectively. These three parishes began as follows:

- A. Saint Agatha parish was organized for German-speaking Catholics in February 1849 under the Diocese of Pittsburgh and was served by missionary priests. The original church was begun that same year and was completed in 1850. The first resident pastor was appointed under the newly-erected Diocese of Erie in 1853. Having outgrown the original church, the parish constructed the present Saint Agatha church which was solemnly dedicated on October 19, 1873 and has been in service ever since.
- B. In early 1862, English-speaking Catholics from Ireland petitioned the Bishop of Erie for permission to separate from Saint Agatha parish to form an Irish parish. Bishop Young gave permission, and Saint Brigid parish – originally known as Saint Bridget parish – was formed. The first resident pastor was assigned in 1863, and the present Saint Brigid church was solemnly dedicated on November 24, 1881. In 1973, Saint Agatha School and Saint

Brigid School merged to form Seton School which continues in operation today as a joint apostolate of the two parishes.

- C. Saint Mary of Grace parish was organized for Italian-speaking Catholics in 1909 with the assignment of a priest for their spiritual care. The original parish church, dedicated in 1912, was replaced by the current parish church which was dedicated in 1958. Following extensive renovations, the parish church was re-dedicated on December 8, 1994.

Current Situation

According to the US Census Bureau, the population of Meadville reached its peak in 1950 with almost 19,000 inhabitants, but by 2020 the Census Bureau estimated the population at approximately 12,600, a decrease of roughly 33%. The Catholic population has decreased at an even greater pace, with an estimated 1400 households in total. Were these households to comprise a single parish, it would fall within the five largest parishes in the diocese.

With a forward-looking vision, the former pastors of the three separate parishes in Meadville began a process of inter-parish collaboration which benefits the Catholic residents of Meadville even today. That collaboration was enhanced in 2016 when a single pastor was appointed for all three parishes (cf. can. 526). In 2017, all three parishes were formally partnered in accord with particular law, resulting in the reorganization of the three separate parish councils into a single pastoral council for the Catholic community of Meadville, while each parish continued to retain its own distinct finance council (cf. can. 537).

In the summer of 2019, with the support of the combined pastoral council, the pastor of the three Meadville parishes initiated a local planning process to examine how the Catholic community of Meadville could best prepare itself to meet future needs of evangelization, care of the poor, ministry to the sick, education and religious formation of youth, campus ministry to the students and faculty of Allegheny College in Meadville, and other essential works of the apostolate. The planning process involved considerable input not only from the clergy and the combined pastoral council and the three distinct parish finance councils, but also from parishioners at large from all three parishes. From this input, a preliminary plan was developed and distributed to parishioners who were all invited to provide feedback. The results of that feedback were received and analyzed, resulting in a final version of a proposal with broad parishioner support. That final version was then approved by the combined pastoral council and all three parish finance councils with the request that the plan be submitted to the Bishop for his consideration.

On February 19, 2021, the Reverend Jeffrey Lucas, as pastor of all three Meadville parishes, formally petitioned that I accept the proposed pastoral plan for Meadville which includes the following canonical provisions: that all three personal parishes be merged by extinctive union from which a new territorial parish for Meadville would arise (cf. can. 121), that Saint Agatha church be designated as the parish church of the new territorial parish, and that both Saint Brigid church and Saint Mary of Grace church be designated as secondary churches of the new parish, but without mission status.

A copy of the petition, together with supporting documentation, was sent to members of the Presbyteral Council to review in preparation for their discussion of the matter. On February 23, 2021 the council members discussed the proposal and the pastor's petition. Among the motivations supporting the petition are: 1) the decline in the Catholic population of Meadville, 2) the decline in the number of priests which has rendered it impossible to assign more than one pastor to Meadville, 3) the need to reorganize the Catholic community of Meadville to build a more stable foundation for future ministry including the formation of a single finance council to parallel a single pastoral council, and 4) the need to make more prudent use of scarce resources – financial and other – in fulfilling the mission of the Church for the faithful of Meadville. The opinions of the dean and the regional vicar were requested, and both supported the petition. Following the discussion, one member abstained and the rest voted to recommend to the Bishop that he grant the petition.

In consideration of the pastor's petition, several additional points should be noted. The parochial administrator of Saint Hippolyte parish does not object and in fact consents to the territory of the parish being divided to allow for the creation of a territorial parish for Meadville, especially since it has been more than a century since anyone has understood the parochial care of Saint Hippolyte parish to extend to Meadville.

At a subsequent meeting of the Presbyteral Council on 5 May 2021, council members reviewed the new parish boundaries for both Saint Hippolyte parish and the new territorial parish for Meadville and unanimously confirmed their support both for the division of Saint Hippolyte parish and the erection of new parish using territory ceded by Saint Hippolyte parish.

It should be noted that the canonical principle that underlies can. 122 indicates that when a juridic person is divided, the temporal goods follow in proportionate division among the people. Consistent with this principle and with canonical equity, all of the temporal goods of St. Hippolyte should remain with Saint Hippolyte parish, since all those individuals who understand themselves to be parishioners of Saint Hippolyte parish will remain so.

The establishment of a territorial parish for Meadville proper will essentially sanate what has been the practice for generations, insofar as even those Catholics in Meadville who are not of German, Irish, or Italian heritage have looked to the priests of Meadville for their spiritual care, and not to the territorial pastor of Saint Hippolyte parish.

Father Lucas believes that merging the parishes and subsequent establishment of a new territorial parish for Meadville, with Saint Agatha church as the parish church and Saint Brigid church and Saint Mary of Grace church as secondary churches of the parish without mission status, is the best decision to provide for the future care of souls in the Meadville area. He does not believe that these measures will result in harm to souls.

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 Meadville area, while also considering the decline in both the general and the Catholic population of Meadville, the inability to assign more than one pastor to Meadville for the foreseeable future, the benefits of forming the Catholic community of Meadville into a single parish in order to build a more stable foundation for future ministry, the benefit of providing the Catholic community of Meadville with a single finance council to parallel a single pastoral council and thus better coordinate pastoral and apostolic activity and evangelization, the prudence of sanating the pastoral practice of generations whereby all of the faithful in Meadville irrespective of their national heritage have looked to the priests of Meadville for their spiritual care, and the advantage of making more prudent use of scarce resources to provide stronger programs for evangelization, care of the sick, the formation of youth, college campus ministry programs, better resources for worship, and all other ministries and apostolates, and the general plan of pastoral care not only for the Meadville area but also for the Diocese as a whole, I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Agatha parish, Saint Brigid parish, and Saint Mary of Grace parish in Meadville shall be merged in accord with can. 121, and from that merger a new parish for Meadville will be erected.
2. The name of the new parish shall be **THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD** parish.
3. The Epiphany of the Lord parish shall be territorial rather than personal in nature, and shall include the territory ceded from Saint Hippolyte parish as described below.
4. The Epiphany of the Lord parish shall have the apostolate of preserving and fostering the German, Irish, and Italian religious and cultural patrimony of parishioners.
5. Saint Hippolyte parish shall be so divided in accord with can. 122 as to cede the following territory to be erected into The Epiphany of the Lord parish: The entirety of the City of Meadville and West Mead Township, as well as those sections of Hayfield Township, Union Township and Vernon Township which are east of PA Route 98 and US Route 19, and south of PA Route 198.
6. The boundaries of The Epiphany of the Lord parish, to which the respective pastors agree, will be as follows: Beginning at the intersection of US Route 19 and US Route 322, going southward along Route 19 to the Greenwood Township line, then east along the Greenwood Township line to Fairfield Township, then east along the Fairfield Township line to East Fairfield Township, then north along the East Fairfield Township line to East Mead Township, then north along the East Mead Township line to Woodcock Township, then west along the Woodcock Township line to French Creek, then north along French Creek to PA Route 198, then west on PA Route 198 to PA Route 98, then south along PA Route 98 back to the point of origin at the intersection with US Route 322 and US Route 19.
7. In accord with can. 121, all of the temporal goods, assets, and liabilities of Saint Agatha parish, Saint Brigid parish, and Saint Mary of Grace parish shall be transferred to The Epiphany of the Lord parish.

8. In accord with the canonical principle which underlies can. 122 and in accord with canonical equity, the temporal goods, assets, and liabilities of Saint Hippolyte parish shall remain entirely with Saint Hippolyte parish, since all who understand themselves to be parishioners of that parish will remain as parishioners of Saint Hippolyte parish.
9. All sacramental records from Saint Agatha parish, Saint Brigid parish, and Saint Mary of Grace parish shall be retained at the parish offices of The Epiphany of the Lord parish.
10. The parish church of The Epiphany of the Lord parish shall be Saint Agatha church. Saint Brigid church and Saint Mary of Grace church shall become secondary churches – without mission status – of The Epiphany of the Lord parish.
11. Saint Brigid church and Saint Mary of Grace church are to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214), but in accord with diocesan law, Masses are not to be celebrated there on Sundays or holy days of obligation or the evenings preceding them. As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in Saint Brigid church and in Saint Mary of Grace church every year on the solemnity of the church's title (February 1 for Saint Brigid of Kildare, and July 2 for Saint Mary of Grace), in accord with current liturgical norms (cf. cann. 1167 §2 and 1168 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, can. 2 of the present Code, and nos. 59 4b and 4c of the Roman Calendar). 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.

This decree is effective June 26, 2021, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 10th day of May, 2021

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor