



## DECREE

### EFFECTING THE MERGER OF HOLY ROSARY PARISH (ERIE) INTO SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST PARISH (ERIE)

#### History

##### A. Saint John the Baptist Parish, Erie

Saint John the Baptist began in 1869 as a mission of Saint Mary, the first German Catholic parish in Erie. The original wooden church was dedicated in 1870, soon followed by a school and rectory. Fr. Bernard Manser, OSB, an assistant pastor at Saint Mary, was associated with the community from the beginning and soon became their pastor. A new school was built in 1887, staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph, and the current church was dedicated in 1900. A third iteration of the school/social center complex was completed in 1951. The church was also updated several times, including a complete interior renovation in the 1980's. In 2004 Saint John the Baptist and Holy Rosary merged their elementary schools into St. John-Holy Rosary Eastside Catholic, which closed definitively in 2012. In 2010 Saint John the Baptist Parish was partnered with Holy Rosary Parish.

##### B. Holy Rosary Parish, Erie

Holy Rosary Parish split off from Saint John the Baptist Parish in 1922, as the latter had become overcrowded. The first church was dedicated in 1923. The parish immediately began a school, starting with the first two grades in a remodeled farmhouse at the back of the church. Over the next few years they added two old barn buildings, so that by 1930 the school included grades 1 to 8, taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph. A new 16-classroom school and social center was completed in 1948. The current stone church was dedicated in 1955, although the steeple had to be removed in 1996. In 2004 Saint John the Baptist and Holy Rosary merged their elementary schools into St. John-Holy Rosary Eastside Catholic, which closed definitively in 2012. In 2010, Holy Rosary Parish was partnered with Saint John the Baptist Parish.

#### Current Situation

Both Holy Rosary and Saint John the Baptist parishes are located on the East side of the City of Erie in Erie County. The church buildings are 0.8 miles apart from each other. Regarding sacred edifices, Holy Rosary Parish possesses a church building with attached rectory. St. John the Baptist Parish possesses one church building.



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. In 2021, that number had dropped to 93,999 – a decline of 32% since its 1960 peak. This population decrease has been even more marked on the East side of Erie. The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been much steeper than the decline in the general population. Holy Rosary Parish reported 1,005 registered parishioners in 2015 and 427 in 2023 – a drop of 58%. The October count Mass attendance estimate for 2015 was 284 and in 2023 it was 143. This indicates a 50% decline in Mass attendance over the last 8 years. In 2015 Holy Rosary Parish reported 9 infant baptisms. This declined to 3 in the 2022-2023 fiscal year. Saint John the Baptist Parish reported 530 members in 2015 and 200 in 2023 – a drop of 62%. The October count dropped from 70 in 2015 to 59 in 2023 – a decline of about 16%. Saint John the Baptist and Holy Rosary Parishes have been partnered since 2010 with notable collaboration between the two developing during those years. Mass times have changed, including a seasonal rotation in which the churches take turns hosting the weekly Saturday evening anticipated Mass. 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 354 and in 2023 was 202 – a combined decline of 43%. The general population decline in the City of Erie, combined with a more dramatic decline in the Catholic population in the neighborhoods of Holy Rosary and Saint John the Baptist 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.

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 Holy Rosary Parish be merged into Saint John the Baptist Parish. Saint John the Baptist church would become the parish church and Holy Rosary 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: Holy Rosary Parish would merge into Saint John the Baptist Parish with Holy Rosary church becoming a secondary mission church (Saturday and Sunday Mass permitted) and then the enlarged Saint John the Baptist Parish would be partnered with Holy Trinity Parish, Reed Street, in Erie. Saint John the Baptist and Holy Trinity churches are 0.5 miles apart. Currently Holy Trinity Parish has a senior associate priest in residence. When a senior associate is no longer available to the new parish partnership, a reduction in weekend Masses will be necessary.

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 Holy Rosary Parish into Saint John the Baptist Parish, and then partner Saint John the Baptist Parish with Holy Trinity Parish.

All of the requirements of canons 50, 51, 127, 166, and 515 have been fulfilled.

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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 County<sup>1</sup>; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Holy Rosary Parish, Erie shall be merged and subsumed into Saint John the Baptist Parish, Erie.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint John the Baptist Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Holy Rosary Parish shall be kept at the offices of Saint John the Baptist Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Holy Rosary Parish shall be transferred to Saint John the Baptist Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint John the Baptist church.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

6. Holy Rosary church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint John the Baptist Parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is permitted in Holy Rosary church.
7. 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.
8. Saint John the Baptist Parish shall be territorial in nature, with boundaries as follows:  
  
In Erie, beginning at the intersection of East 18th Street and Holland Street: east on East 18th Street to the Norfolk Southern Railway Company railroad track; east on the railroad track to the Bayfront Connector/state highway 290; southeast on the Bayfront Connector to the point where East 34th Street would intersect; west along East 34th Street to Holland Street; north on Holland Street to East 18th Street.
9. Furthermore, as will be enacted in a separate decree, Saint John the Baptist Parish is to be partnered with Holy Trinity Parish in Erie.

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

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie  
on this 11<sup>th</sup> 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