



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI PARISH (BRADFORD) INTO SAINT BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX PARISH (BRADFORD)

History

A. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Parish

The Catholic community in the Bradford area received the first resident pastor of the newly-established Saint Bernard of Clairvaux [hereafter, Saint Bernard] parish in 1876. By 1879, a proper parish church was built to replace the structure that had temporarily served as church. In 1890 work began on a new and larger church, with the cornerstone laid in 1892; that church – still serving as the current Saint Bernard church – was dedicated on October 8, 1893 by Bishop Tobias Mullen. Saint Bernard parish continued to grow. On April 17, 1946 Archbishop John Mark Gannon divided the Catholic community in the Bradford area into three distinct parishes, with one part remaining as Saint Bernard parish, one part becoming the new Saint Francis of Assisi [hereafter, Saint Francis] parish in Bradford, and one part becoming the new Our Mother of Perpetual Help parish in Lewis Run. The growth of Saint Bernard parish reversed itself, and the parish has experienced a marked decrease in the number of active parishioners. Despite this fact, the parish continues to be structured as it was in 1946, and the church dedicated in 1893 continues to serve as the parish church.

B. Saint Francis of Assisi Parish

On April 17, 1946, the eastern section of Saint Bernard Parish – known as East Bradford and comprising the Sixth Ward at the time – was erected as Saint Francis of Assisi parish. Construction of a parish church took place in 1950. From 1946 until 1992, Saint Francis parish had its own full-time pastor, but from 1992 to 2017 Saint Francis parish in Bradford shared a pastor or administrator with Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Lewis Run. On February 17, 2017, Our Mother of Perpetual Help parish was subsumed into Saint Francis parish and Saint Francis parish began to share a pastor with Saint Bernard parish. This is the current situation. Consequently, in 2017 Catholics in the Bradford area returned to having a single pastor for the entire Catholic community for the first time since 1946.

Current Situation

Regarding sacred edifices, Saint Francis parish has two churches: the parish church (Saint Francis of Assisi) and a secondary mission church (Our Mother of Perpetual Help church). Saint Bernard church continues to serve as the parish church of Saint Bernard parish.

The Bradford area and all of McKean County have seen significant demographic changes. The general population has been gradually but steadily decreasing for more than 70 years. According to the US Census Bureau, the population of Bradford itself in 2010 was less than half of what it was in its peak in 1930. In addition, the decade from 2010 to 2020 saw another 7% decline in the general population of McKean County.

The decline in the number of active parishioners in both Saint Bernard and Saint Francis parishes is even more severe than the decrease in the general population. Since 2010, most of the baptisms, all of the First Communions, and most of the marriages have been at Saint Bernard parish. Faced with numerous growing challenges and determined to find a better path forward for the future, the parishioners of both Saint Bernard and Saint Francis parishes embarked on an extensive self-study and pastoral planning process which involved broad input from the membership of both parishes.

A polling of parishioners indicated that roughly three-quarters of parishioners support the idea of merging Saint Bernard and Saint Francis parishes together in order to provide for a better future for the Catholic community in the Bradford area. Just under one-quarter would prefer that the parishes remain as is.

On September 23, 2022 a townhall-style meeting was held in which over 150 parishioners participated. Parishioners discussed the pros and cons of merging the parishes, including which parish would be better subsumed into the other, which church would be designated the parish church, and so forth. Following that meeting, the pastoral planning group charged with overseeing the pastoral planning process met on October 18, 2022 and formally recommended that Saint Francis parish be subsumed into Saint Bernard parish, and that Saint Bernard church would serve as the parish church. Their recommendation was then forwarded to the separate parish finance councils of Saint Bernard parish and Saint Francis parish. In a joint meeting on November 15, 2022 each finance council voted to endorse the recommendation.

On November 21, 2022 Father John Jacquell, pastor of both Saint Bernard and Saint Francis parishes, petitioned Bishop Persico to merge Saint Francis parish into Saint Bernard parish. With the support of the pastoral planning group as well as the finance councils of the two parishes, Father Jacquell identified the underlying reasons for the petition as a way of enhancing financial, liturgical, catechetical, and service efficiency with the hope and goal of renewing and energizing the Catholic community of Bradford. Fully aware that Saint Bernard church will require some extensive repair work, the pastor and planning group and council members fully support the request that Saint Bernard church be retained as the parish church, that Saint Francis church become a secondary church with mission status, and that Our Mother of Perpetual Help church become a secondary church without mission status.

The petition and supporting documents were presented beforehand to the Presbyteral Council which discussed the recommendation at its meeting on November 29, 2022. The regional episcopal vicar and the dean both added their support to the petition. After discussion, the council members voted unanimously to recommend to the Bishop that he grant the petition to merge Saint Francis parish into Saint Bernard parish, with the status of the various churches to be decreed in accord with the recommendation.

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 whole Bradford area, 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; the envisioning of this merger as an integral part of the overall pastoral plan for the Bradford area¹; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Francis of Assisi Parish in Bradford shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Parish in Bradford.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Parish. It shall be territorial in nature, with the parish retaining all of the territory which it now possesses, and to it will be added all of the territory of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Francis of Assisi Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish shall be transferred to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Bernard of Clairvaux church.
6. Saint Francis of Assisi church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux 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 Francis of Assisi church.
7. Our Mother of Perpetual Help church in Lewis Run, until now a secondary church with mission status, shall become a secondary church but without mission status of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of

¹ The pastoral plan for the Bradford area 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 parish's community and ecumenical involvement, 6) create a more welcoming environment, and 7) sustain the parish financially.

obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is no longer permitted in Our Mother of Perpetual Help church.

8. Furthermore, both Saint Francis of Assisi church and Our Mother of Perpetual Help church are to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214). As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in each church every year on the solemnity of the 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.

This decree is effective March 1, 2023, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 1st day of February, 2023

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor