



DECREE

EFFECTING THE RELEGATION OF SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH (MOUNT JEWETT) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

History

Mass was first celebrated in the Mount Jewett area in the late 1880's with priests traveling at times from Smethport, Kane, or Rasselas. Eventually the local Catholic community built Saint Joseph church in Mount Jewett, which was solemnly blessed on May 9, 1897. Records indicate that in 1900 Saint Joseph mission in Mount Jewett was raised to the status of a parish. The last resident pastor departed in 1998. Saint Joseph Parish then shared a pastor with Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport until 2017, when Saint Joseph merged into Saint Elizabeth Parish. Regularly scheduled Masses ceased at Saint Joseph church in 2023. Since then, apart from one funeral, there have been no requests for sacraments at Saint Joseph church.

Current Situation

According to the law, in order to relegate a church to profane use or even to close it permanently, it is necessary that there be some grave reason(s) suggesting that the church no longer be used for divine worship. Often the gravity of the cause becomes evident when a number of factors are considered together. Can. 1222 §2 states:

Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can relegate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church, and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby.

Mount Jewett is located in McKean County, Pennsylvania. The same demographic trends that have impacted all of northwestern Pennsylvania are also in play in this region. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of the Mount Jewett area has declined nearly 70% since 1940 to fewer than 600 residents today. Over the past eight years there has been an even more significant reduction in the number of Catholic residents in the Mount Jewett area. In 2015, Saint Joseph Parish listed 59 registered households and average Sunday Mass attendance of 46 persons. By 2022, the average Sunday Mass



attendance was approximately 10 persons. Since the last Sunday Mass was celebrated in Saint Joseph church in July 2023, nearly all active Catholics in the Mount Jewett area have begun attending Mass in Smethport, Wilcox, Johnsonburg or Kane.

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish (Smethport) has been responsible for the maintenance of Saint Joseph since 2017. The Saint Joseph church building was constructed in the late 1890's and a small social hall was added a few years later. Currently the church building has no scheduled Masses, sacraments or other devotional practices. Aside from the annual titular feast day, the church has remained largely unused since July of 2023. The building is in need of significant repairs – including a new heating system and a new roof. Ongoing expenses such as utilities, insurance and maintenance are now the responsibility of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, which as a result of a recent merger, now also has responsibility for the secondary mission church of Saint Gabriel in Port Allegany.

Just as significant as the expense and physical condition of the Saint Joseph church building is its remote location. The pastor resides at Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport which is a 32-mile roundtrip to Mount Jewett. Due to the fragile condition of the church's furnace and roof, regular inspections of the building are required (daily during extreme cold conditions) to ensure that heat is functioning and no major water issues develop. Considering that the secondary mission church of Saint Gabriel is 10 miles away in the opposite direction, the extent and difficulty of travel is unsustainable for one priest. No other clergy are available to assist in this very rural area of the diocese. The former Saint Joseph parishioners in the Mount Jewett area are generally elderly and unable to take care of the maintenance and inspection of the structure – especially in adverse weather. That responsibility routinely falls to the pastor.

On September 28, 2024, the pastor of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, the Reverend Joseph Dougherty, wrote to Bishop Persico requesting consideration for the relegation of the Saint Joseph church building in Mount Jewett.

After four months of additional research and discussion, the Saint Elizabeth of Hungary parish finance council voted unanimously on February 5, 2025, to reaffirm the pastor's petition to the Bishop to relegate Saint Joseph church to profane but not sordid use. Members of the pastoral council unanimously did the same on February 12, 2025.

Thus, the pastor, being the only person who can legitimately claim rights concerning the church edifice, has given his consent. (cf. can. 1222 §2). He attests that relegating of Saint Joseph church to profane use is not likely to result in any harm to the good of souls (cf. can. 1222 §2). All of the sacraments and devotions are available at the aforementioned regional parishes. The pastor is also aware of the obligation to see to it that Saint Joseph church, if relegated, not be given over to sordid use.

This information was shared with the members of the Presbyteral Council on February 26, 2025. Having considered the matter attentively, the members of the Council unanimously

recommended to me that I grant the petition of the pastor to relegate the Saint Joseph church building to profane but not sordid use.

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

Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the best possible means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, while considering that the Catholic population of the Mount Jewett area has declined dramatically, that regularly scheduled Masses ceased there in July of 2023; that one funerals and no weddings or baptisms have been celebrated there in recent years, and there is no request from the faithful to use the church; the remote location of the church and its deteriorating condition; that there is no pastoral need for the church edifice; that the pastor has petitioned for the relegation of the church with the unanimous support of the members of the pastoral council and the finance council; and that there does not appear to be any probable detriment to the good of souls, I judge that the aforementioned reasons, when considered cumulatively, constitute the grave cause required by the law (cf. can. 1222 §2) for the relegation of the church to profane but not sordid use, and I hereby decree the following:

Saint Joseph church in Mount Jewett, Pennsylvania, is relegated to profane but not sordid use, according to the norm of can. 1222 §2.

This decree is effective on March 10, 2025, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 7th day of March, 2025

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor