



## DECREE

### REVOKING AND REPLACING THE DECREE OF NOVEMBER 15, 2019 EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT STEPHEN PARISH (OIL CITY) INTO SAINT JOSEPH PARISH (OIL CITY)

#### Revocation and Replacement

On November 15, 2019, I issued a decree effecting the merger of Saint Stephen Parish in Oil City into Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City. On November 22, 2019, within the peremptory time period, Ms. Connie Schwabenbauer, being a parishioner of Saint Stephen Parish and serving as Procurator for numerous other parishioners, presented a *remonstratio* seeking the revocation of that decree, and also seeking that all of the patrimony of Saint Stephen Parish be sequestered pending the outcome of a hierarchical recourse or the establishment of some other provision following continued study of the situation.

Although the *remonstratio* itself contains numerous errors in its canonical argument, it does nonetheless demonstrate a significant pastoral situation in Oil City which needs to be addressed. For that reason, with this present decree, I hereby revoke the decree of November 15, 2019 and replace it with this present decree.

#### History

##### A. Saint Joseph Parish

The oil boom during the 1860's in Venango County resulted in the establishment of Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City in 1864. The original parish church, soon outgrown, was replaced with the current church edifice which was dedicated on June 26, 1894. Shortly thereafter, the parish was divided when the area located south of the Allegheny River was erected in 1898 as Saint Stephen Parish. This action significantly reduced the geographic size of Saint Joseph Parish. The erection of a personal parish for Catholics of Polish background, i.e., Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, did not affect the territory of Saint Joseph Parish, but the subsequent creation in 1922 of a new territorial parish named Our Lady Help of Christians in Siverly did further reduce the size of Saint Joseph Parish.

## B. Saint Stephen Parish

As noted above, due to the rapid growth of the Catholic population in the Oil City area at the end of the nineteenth century, Saint Joseph Parish was divided into two separate parishes in 1898, with Saint Joseph Parish continuing to exist on the north side of the Allegheny River, while the newly formed Saint Stephen Parish received the parish territory south of the Allegheny River. The present Saint Stephen Church was dedicated in 1907. The structure, although renovated interiorly and rededicated in 1952, remains that built in 1907.

The territory of Saint Stephen Parish is currently greater than its original geographic footprint. On February 13, 2017, Saint Venantius parish in Rouseville was subsumed into Saint Stephen Parish, effectively enlarging the territory of the parish to include the areas west of Oil Creek. As a result, Saint Stephen Parish today is larger geographically than it was at its founding in 1898.

### Current Situation: The Parishes

The years leading up to the Second World War saw substantial growth of the Church across the entire diocese, marked by the opening of new parishes, the building of schools and churches and convents, and the general flourishing of a Catholic culture. In some areas, this growth continued after the Second World War, but in other areas like Oil City a population decline had already begun by 1940. The population of Oil City in 1930 numbered more than 22,000, whereas the US Census Bureau estimates the 2018 population of Oil City to be fewer than 10,000. The population decrease is recently averaging slightly less than 1% per year.

The demographic decrease is far more striking in the Oil City parishes than in the area's general population as a whole. Taking into account adjustments for households merged into these parishes in 2017, parish census figures show an annual decrease of 4.4 % at Saint Joseph Parish, and 5.5% at Saint Stephen Parish. Currently, Saint Joseph Parish lists 335 households while Saint Stephen Parish lists 398 households. At the current pace, Saint Joseph will soon be the larger of the two parishes. The Catholic community of Oil City now numbers fewer than 750 households, which is approximately the equivalent of an average mid-sized parish.

Part of this dramatic change in parishioner statistics is due to improved census figures which more accurately reflect true parish membership, but it cannot be denied that there is an actual steep decline in the number of parishioners. Younger generations of Catholics in Oil City are not replacing older generations. Whereas there were 323 baptisms in Oil City in 1950, in 2018 there were only 14, nearly a 96% decrease. This amended decree attempts to provide time to study more effectively the root causes of this decline.

On the positive side, since restructuring in 2017 which placed the two parishes in Oil City under a combined pastoral leadership, the Catholic community in Oil City is reinvigorating efforts at evangelization, social assistance, adult faith formation, and other efforts. Nonetheless, although these efforts may slow the precipitous decline in the number of Catholics, there are no indications that the situation will reverse itself, given the general

decline of religion in the American culture as a whole and the continued decline of the general population of the Oil City region.

#### Current Situation: The Church Buildings

In August 2018, it was discovered that the towers of St. Stephen Church needed emergency repair work when stones fell from the towers. Temporary emergency measures were put in place to prevent other stones from dislodging. It had become obvious, however, that major decisions would soon need to be made regarding the building's deteriorating condition.

After some preliminary discussions, and acting upon local initiative, the Reverend John Miller, pastor of both Saint Joseph Parish and Saint Stephen Parish, formed an *ad hoc* committee in May of 2019 to look at the present situation of the parishes, the buildings, and the future of the Catholic community in Oil City as a whole. The question was: How can the Catholic community of Oil City position itself to build a foundation for the future? The committee formed by the pastor had ten members, of whom 6 were elected and 4 were appointed. The committee met with the combined pastoral council of both parishes and with other parishioners, studied the available data, and then obtained the approval of the combined pastoral council to publicize a proposed plan for Oil City. The committee then asked all parishioners for feedback.

Parishioners were able to provide feedback for one month, at the end of which the committee reviewed it. Numerous concerns and suggestions were made and taken into consideration. In the end, the committee believed that the majority of these suggestions and concerns could be satisfactorily met with the original proposal, and they re-proposed the plan essentially unchanged. The pastoral council reviewed it again, and then voted in favor of recommending to the pastor that he send a proposal to the Bishop to merge Saint Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish. As a result, on October 23, 2019 Father John Miller, as pastor of both Saint Joseph Parish and St. Stephen Parish, wrote to me as Diocesan Bishop asking that I merge St. Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish.

It should be noted that the plan which Father Miller proposed was developed in Oil City by members of the *ad hoc* committee who reside in Oil City, and was reviewed and approved by the pastoral council after all parishioners of both Saint Joseph and Saint Stephen Parishes were invited to offer feedback.

I brought the matter of the proposed merger before the Presbyteral Council on November 7, 2019. I asked the council members for their advice on the aforementioned proposal. The council discussed the precipitous decline in the census of the two parishes, the deteriorating condition of both Saint Joseph Church and Saint Stephen Church and the nature and extent of the repairs needed at each, the estimated costs of repairing each, the various financial reserves available to the two parishes, and the advisability of depleting significant amounts of those reserves on emergency repairs – effectively leaving little for pastoral activities. The council members also discussed the process that had taken place in Oil City for arriving at the proposal, together with an overview of the feedback received from parishioners. The council members noted that the pastor had given his consent; the opinions of the dean and the

episcopal vicar were also presented. After considerable discussion and the weighing of several options, the members of the Presbyteral Council expressed their unanimous support for the proposal to merge Saint Stephen Parish into Saint Joseph Parish, with Saint Joseph Church retaining its status as the parochial church. It is that merger of the parishes as discussed by the members of the Presbyteral Council which is likewise the object of this present decree.

Following the issuance of the decree of November 15, 2019 and the subsequent reception of the Procurator's *remonstratio*, I remain convinced of the inevitable need for a single parish in Oil City, as supported unanimously by the members of the Presbyteral Council. At the same time, I recognize the pastoral need for further review regarding the status of Saint Stephen Church.

It should be noted that the provisions of this decree, as outlined below, do not alter in any practical way who will be administering the temporal goods of the Catholic community of Oil City, or who will be providing pastoral care for the people of Oil City. Nor does it affect the availability of the sacraments and other means of salvation for the faithful of Oil City. Nonetheless, there is still ample cause to support this decree in that it provides for more effective pastoral care by uniting the community under a single parish, provides a single pastoral council and a single finance council to assist the pastor in implementing a unified pastoral vision for the Oil City area, eliminates any unnecessary duplication of services and expenses, ensures that the temporal goods (though temporarily sequestered) will follow the people who contributed to them, and combines personnel and ministerial resources to enhance parochial life and to aid in evangelization efforts.

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 Oil City area, in particular consideration of the pastoral need to address the concerns of parishioners in Oil City, – both those who feel that the planning process was too hasty and those who feel that it should have been done decades ago –, while considering the requests presented in the *remonstratio*, and also considering the already diminished number of parishioners of both Saint Joseph Parish and Saint Stephen Parish which at this point is the equivalent of a mid-sized parish, the projected further decline of their number, the relevant demographics of each parish, the historical origin of Saint Stephen Parish as an outgrowth of Saint Joseph Parish, the physical condition of both Saint Joseph and Saint Stephen Churches and the estimated costs to repair each, the possibility of better stewardship in the use of temporal goods and personnel, the results of a broad consultation of the faithful in the matter, and the general plan of pastoral care not only for the Oil City area but also for the Diocese as a whole, I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Stephen Parish in Oil City shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Joseph Parish in Oil City.

2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Joseph Parish. It shall be territorial in nature, with the parish retaining all of the territory which Saint Joseph Parish now possesses, and to it will be added all of the territory of Saint Stephen Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Stephen Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Joseph Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Stephen Parish shall be transferred to Saint Joseph Parish, in accord with no. 5, below.
5. In accord with the petition in the *remonstratio*, pending the outcome of a potential recourse or the establishment after further study of some other provision according to the norm of law, the patrimonial assets formerly belonging to Saint Stephen Parish may be used for the ordinary maintenance of Saint Stephen Church, Saint Stephen Rectory, Saint Stephen School, and Saint Venantius Church, but for all other purposes, the patrimonial assets are to be temporarily sequestered, during which time they are to remain untouched.
6. The parish church shall be Saint Joseph Church. Saint Stephen Church shall become a secondary church of Saint Joseph Parish, with mission status. Therefore, in accord with diocesan law, Masses may be celebrated there on Sundays or holy days of obligation or the evenings preceding them. Permission is hereby given for the reservation of the Most Blessed Sacrament (cf. can. 934 §1, 2<sup>o</sup>), in the event of which the norms of cann. 934 §2 and 937 would need to be observed.
7. As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in Saint Stephen Church every year on the solemnity of the church's title (December 26), 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 January 1, 2020, anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie  
on this 13th day of December, 2019

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

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

*Christopher J. Singer*

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL  
Chancellor