



NEWS RELEASE

DIocese OF ERIE

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Embargoed until 9 p.m., Sept. 20, 2016

Diocese of Erie unveils final plan for parish restructuring

The long-anticipated final plan for parish restructuring in the Northern Vicariate of the Catholic Diocese of Erie was announced Tuesday evening to a gathering of area clergy and parish leaders at Our Lady of Peace Church in Erie.

This was the first of three announcements scheduled this week in different regions, or vicariates, of the 13-county diocese in northwestern Pennsylvania.

On Tuesday, the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, presented his final decisions on parish restructuring in the Northern Vicariate, which includes Erie and Warren counties, and part of Forest County.

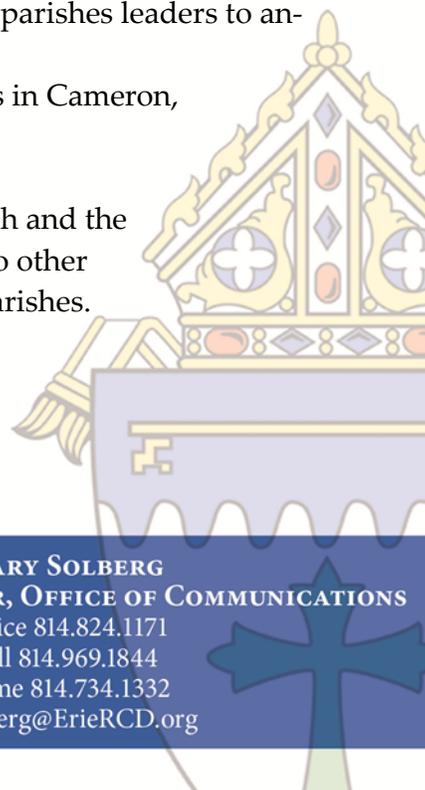
On Wednesday, the bishop will present his final decisions on restructuring in the Western Vicariate, comprising churches in Clarion, Crawford, Mercer, Venango counties and the remaining part of Forest County. And on Thursday, he will meet with clergy and parishes leaders to announce final decisions for churches in the Eastern Vicariate, which covers parish communities in Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean and Potter counties.

The final plan calls for two parish models: the stand-alone parish and the partnered parish. In addition, a number of parishes will be merged into other parishes, creating either new stand-alone parishes or new partnered parishes.

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The final restructuring plan comes after a two-year study of the 116 parishes in the diocese. Last spring, the bishop announced a preliminary plan for restructuring that was immediately followed by a feedback period in which nearly 2,000 people submitted their responses. Also, each parish was invited to submit an official survey that assessed the recommended changes.

Bishop Persico made his final decisions based upon that feedback and from input from the diocesan Priest Council. The council voted overwhelmingly in favor of the recommended changes. Several of the final decisions reflect changes from the preliminary plan. (*See the attachment.*)

“Believe me, we had some robust discussions. I remain deeply grateful for the thoughtful insights, the prayerful consideration and the wisdom and counsel provided,” Bishop Persico said.

Under the final plan, 19 parish communities throughout the Diocese of Erie will cease to exist. That number includes five in the Northern Vicariate, seven in the Western Vicariate, and seven in the Eastern Vicariate.

The church buildings of those 19 parishes will continue to remain in use, though not all will continue to offer Sunday Masses.

Parish communities that will cease to exist in the Northern Vicariate are:

- St. Anthony of Padua, Sheffield
- St. Elizabeth, Corry
- St. Hedwig, Erie
- St. Luke, Youngsville
- St. Philip, Crossingville.

Churches in the Northern Vicariate that will become secondary churches and will no longer have Sunday Masses are:

- Our Lady of Fatima, Canadohta Lake, Masses offered only from Labor Day to Memorial Day
- St. Ann, Erie, no Sunday Masses except for the traditional Latin Mass (extraordinary form)
- St. Elizabeth Corry
- St. Hedwig, Erie

Specific announcements regarding parish/church changes in the Eastern and Western vicariates of the diocese will be announced later this week. (*See the attached complete list of final restructuring details for the Northern Vicariate.*)

Of the 19 parishes that will cease to exist in the Diocese of Erie, 17 of them already are sharing a pastor with another parish. Pastors will continue to be needed in all 17 of the other parishes. The shortage of priests is not the only reason, or even the principal reason, for the pastoral planning and subsequent changes, but Bishop Persico said “it is a concern that reminds us we must continue to pray for and to encourage vocations to the priesthood.” He also noted it underscores the need for planning to be woven into the efforts of the diocese on an ongoing basis.

A Parish Listening Task Force, under the leadership of Msgr. Richard Siefer, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, DuBois, and an in-depth study of parish life in the diocese found that the overall population of the diocese shrunk by 6.7 percent in the last decade.

Additionally, the number of households registered in Catholic parishes decreased by 19 percent, from 2004 to 2014. Mass attendance dropped by 26 percent in roughly the same period, and infant baptisms have declined every year.

Bishop Persico’s singular focus has been on strengthening the faith community by pooling resources and by coming together for a broader, deeper celebration of the sacramental life of the church.

“What we’re trying to do is provide the best possible pastoral care for our people with fewer resources. We have fewer priests and fewer people now and the demographics are changing,” the bishop said. “We’re hopefully seeing in this a way to make the parishes more vibrant and welcoming so that people can have a prayerful opportunity to worship.”

By January 2017, the bishop expects to make final clergy appointments. The decrees for parish restructuring take effect Feb. 13, but parishes have until June 30, 2017, to implement the plan fully.

Several presenters at this week’s announcements emphasized the need for parishes to use the coming months as a time to prepare communities spiritually for the changes. Msgr. Edward Lohse, episcopal vicar for canonical services, was on-hand to explain the canonical terms regarding parish structure. (*See the attached preparation guide that includes definitions.*)

Deacon Marty Eisert, who spearheaded the pastoral planning effort, said there are two guides immediately available to individuals and parishes as they begin to coordinate the changes in their communities. One of the guides deals with preparation for the coming changes; the other offers suggested prayer services. (*See attachments.*)