



DECREE

EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT GABRIEL THE ARCHANGEL PARISH (PORT ALLEGANY) INTO SAINT ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY PARISH (SMETHPORT)

History

A. Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, Smethport

Records concerning the early history of the Catholic community in Smethport are scarce. In the early 1800's the Catholic people of Smethport were served by a church in the village of Instanter in what is now Sergeant Township. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they were cared for by the former Saint Mary Parish in Sartwell. The original Saint Elizabeth church stood on McCoy Corners, but it is not known when it was built. Fr. Peter Patterson, pastor of Saint Mary, built a new church for Smethport in the current location, which was dedicated in 1876. This also appears to be when Saint Elizabeth became its own parish. Later the parish name was expanded to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. The second church unfortunately burned to the ground on Christmas Eve, 1904, and the present church was dedicated in 1907. Saint Elizabeth served the mission church of Saint Sabina in Clermont in the 1930's, which closed in 1940 after Clermont became a ghost town. In 2003 Saint Joseph Parish, Mount Jewett, partnered with Saint Elizabeth Parish in Smethport; becoming a secondary mission church of Smethport in 2017.

B. Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish, Port Allegany

The Catholic community in Port Allegany began as another of the missions of Saint Mary, Sartwell. The pastor of Sartwell actually resided in Port Allegany in the 1850's. The community was officially named Saint Gabriel the Archangel in 1876. Soon after they built their own church, dedicated in 1883, and in 1897 Saint Gabriel the Archangel received its first resident pastor. The church was completely renovated after a devastating fire in 1951. For many years the pastor of Saint Gabriel also served the mission church of Saint Mary in Roulette. In 2009 Saint Gabriel the Archangel was partnered and began to share a pastor with Saint Eulalia, Coudersport.

Current Situation

Regarding sacred edifices, Saint Gabriel the Archangel and St. Elizabeth of Hungary parishes both have one parish church building, meetings spaces and a rectory. Saint Elizabeth Parish also has Saint Joseph church – a secondary mission church located in Mount Jewett.

The territory of both Saint Elizabeth and Saint Gabriel parishes is situated largely in McKean County, Pennsylvania. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of McKean County has decreased by more than 6,000 people in the period from the year 2000 to 2022 – a drop of more than 13% in only two decades. The population drop results from, among other factors, the decline in manufacturing jobs in this area. The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been even more marked in just the past decade. St. Elizabeth Parish had 237 registered households in 2012/2013, and 174 in 2021/2022 – a decrease of 26%. St. Gabriel Parish had 128 registered households in 2012/2013 and only 68 in 2021/2022 – a decrease of approximately 38%. During the time period of 2014 to 2022, St. Elizabeth Parish saw a decrease in average Sunday Mass attendance (as reported in the annual October Count) of 125 people – or a 50% decline in 8 years. During the same period St. Gabriel Parish saw an average weekly attendance decrease of 75 persons – or a 60% decline. The changing demographics of the area – declining general population and declining number of Catholics – combined with 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 in McKean County.

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 Bradford Deanery changed in recent years, the need for parish reconfiguration became more necessary.

On March 9, 2023, Bishop Persico presented a preliminary plan for parish reconfiguration in the Bradford Deanery and opened it up for discussion among members of the Presbyteral Council.

On March 16, 2023, at a meeting held at Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport, Bishop Persico unveiled the Bradford Deanery preliminary plan to the pastors of the deanery and a representative group of lay leaders from each parish. 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 suggested that Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish, Port Allegany merge with Saint Eulalia Parish, Coudersport. Feedback from priests and parishioners indicated that a Saint Gabriel – Saint Elizabeth merger might make more sense. Saint Gabriel church is 7 miles closer to Saint Elizabeth church than to Saint Eulalia, and most Saint Gabriel parishioners live in the region between Port Allegany and Smethport. Additionally, further study of the deanery indicated that parish mergers were needed in neighboring Potter County as well. Merging Saint Gabriel into Saint Eulalia could ultimately result in a parish with a vast territory – impractical for one priest to cover, especially during a typical weekend Mass schedule. Therefore, as a result of feedback from priests and people of the area, the preliminary plan was changed to reflect a merger of Saint Gabriel the Archangel into Saint Elizabeth Parish. The current pastors in these communities communicated that many efficiencies would result from these revised proposed parish reconfigurations.

At the June 22, 2023, meeting of the Presbyteral Council Bishop Persico presented the revised proposal for parish reconfiguration for McKean County. The Presbyteral Council unanimously approved the plan to merge Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish into Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish with Saint Elizabeth of Hungary church serving as the parish church, Saint Gabriel the Archangel church becoming a secondary mission church, and Saint Joseph church (Mount Jewett) becoming a secondary church without mission status.

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 McKean County 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 Deanery¹; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish, Port Allegany shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in Smethport.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Elizabeth of Hungary 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 Gabriel the Archangel Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish.
4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Gabriel the Archangel Parish shall be transferred to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Elizabeth of Hungary church.
6. Saint Gabriel the Archangel church shall become a secondary mission church of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary 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 Gabriel the Archangel church.
7. Saint Joseph church in Mount Jewett shall become a secondary church without mission status of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is no longer permitted in Saint Joseph church.

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.

8. Furthermore, Saint Joseph church, Mount Jewett, is 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 the church every year on the solemnity of the church's title (March 19), 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.
9. The territory of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish shall now be:
In McKean County, all of Keating, Hamlin, Sergeant, Norwich and Liberty townships; and that portion of Annin township south of Annin Creek Road (state road 1002).

This decree is effective at the start of Advent, December 2, 2023. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery
of the Diocese of Erie
on this 10th day of November, 2023

+Lawrence T. Persico

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

Christopher J. Singer

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL
Chancellor