



## DECREE

### EFFECTING THE RELEGATION OF MOUNT CALVARY CHURCH (ERIE) TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE

#### History

Archbishop John Mark Gannon established a number of parishes in the City of Erie to accommodate the growing population after the Second World War. One of these was Mount Calvary, established on December 13, 1951, for the northeast section of the city. The original church, which doubled as a social hall, was completed in 1954. Mount Calvary then opened a school, staffed by the Sisters of St. Benedict, which was operated by the parish until 2004. The first church/social hall was partially destroyed by a fire in 1975. The parish then decided not only to restore the hall, but to build a dedicated church space. The current church, completed in 1977, was built as an addition to the school building. Mount Calvary Parish was partnered with Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish in Lawrence Park in 2017. Both parishes merged into Saint James Parish in Erie in July of 2024, at which time regularly scheduled Masses ceased at Mount Calvary church. Except for one funeral, there have been no requests for sacraments at Mount Calvary church since then.

#### 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.*

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Erie County peaked at 281,502 around the year 2012. By 2022, the county population had fallen to 267,689 – a drop of 4.9%. The population of the City of Erie peaked at 138,440 around the year 1960. By the year 2000, the city had approximately 103,748 residents. In 2021, that number had dropped to 93,999 – a decline of 32% since its 1960 peak.



The decline in parish membership and Mass attendance has been much steeper than the decline in the general population. Mount Calvary Parish reported 372 registered parishioners in 2015 and 143 in 2024 – a drop of 62%. The October count Mass attendance estimate for 2015 was 244 and in 2023 it was 56. This indicates a 77% decline in Mass attendance over 8 years. (Mount Calvary no longer had weekend Masses in October 2024.)

In July of 2024, Mount Calvary Parish, along with Saint Mark the Evangelist Parish (Lawrence Park) were merged in an extinctive union into Saint James Parish, Erie. Mount Calvary church building, being the least used of the three churches and fewer than two miles from Saint James and Saint Mark the Evangelist churches, was given secondary church status – meaning that no Sunday or holy days Masses were to be held at that site.

On February 6, 2025, the pastor of Saint James Parish, the Reverend James McCormick, wrote to Bishop Persico requesting the relegation of the Mount Calvary church building in Erie to profane but not sordid use.

On January 19, 2025 the members of the Saint James Parish Finance Council unanimously expressed their support of Father McCormick's petition to the Bishop to relegate the Mount Calvary church building. Members of the pastoral council unanimously did the same on January 6, 2025.

As outlined in the pastor's petition, Mount Calvary church has been very lightly utilized over the past 8 years. Since 2017, there have been 35 funerals, 7 baptisms, 5 first communions, 1 confirmation and 2 weddings. There has been one funeral and no other requests for the use of the church since the summer of 2024. Mount Calvary church is physically attached to the former Mount Calvary School building. The school building is currently leased by a charter school tenant. Within the next few years, the Mount Calvary school building will need a new roof, new windows, and a new furnace at a combined estimated cost of \$809,000. The church building is integrated into the heating, plumbing and electrical systems of the school building. The church also has no restrooms of its own – thus it would be financially prohibitive to physically separate the church building from the school.

Saint James Parish is currently responsible for the financial upkeep of three church buildings (Saint James church, Saint Mark the Evangelist church, and Mount Calvary church) along with eight other buildings and properties which is creating a financial burden on the parish. The cost to maintain the Mount Calvary physical plant was \$59,000 in the 2023-2024 fiscal year. As mentioned above, because the Mount Calvary church and school buildings are inseparably attached, it is not possible to identify the cost of the church alone.

The weekly offertory of Saint James parish is unable to keep pace with parish expenses, so the parish is operating in deficit spending. At the present rate, all unrestricted parish funds will be depleted by 2034 – likely sooner.

At the present, there is a limited-time offer to purchase the entire Mount Calvary building complex. Since 2019, the R.B. Wiley Charter School has rented the Mount Calvary school building. They pay \$114,000 annually for the use of everything except for the church. The growing needs of the charter school, together with the fact that they receive more government funding if they own their own building, mean that the school intends to either purchase the Mount Calvary property or move to another location after the current academic year. Loss of this tenant, and the rental income, would create a serious financial burden for Saint James Parish – since the aforementioned repairs to the school must be done whether the school is leased or not. Additionally, many residents living in the area of the Mount Calvary complex have expressed deep concern about the possibility of the building sitting vacant – and the detrimental effect that could have on the safety of the neighborhood. If allowed to purchase the building, the charter school intends to convert the church building into a school auditorium.

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 Mount Calvary 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 less than 2 miles away at Saint James and Saint Mark the Evangelist churches. The pastor is also aware of the obligation to see to it that Mount Calvary 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 Mount Calvary church building to profane but not sordid use.

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

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Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the best possible means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of Saint James Parish, while considering that the Catholic population of the Erie area has declined dramatically, that regularly scheduled Masses ceased there in July of 2024; that one funeral and no baptisms or weddings have been celebrated there in recent months, and there is no request from the faithful to use the church; the costly repairs needed to the school building; the impracticality of separating the church building from the school building; 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 his 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:

**Mount Calvary church in Erie, 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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