

June 25, 2024

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Joint Parish Councils:
of St. John's, St. Joseph's, St. Leo's, St. Paul's and St. Peter's**

Father Paul Angelicchio welcomed all in attendance and said the opening prayer.

Father Sean O'Brien said that the minutes of the last meeting on May 21st, 2024, were sent out to each parish to be shared with parish council members.

Both Fr. Seibt and Trustee Ellen Holst were introduced to the council members in attendance.

Father Christopher Seibt's background is of Pastor of Divine Mercy Parish and Vice Chancellor of the Syracuse Diocese. Father Christopher handles Canon Law for the Diocese. The Catholic Church has specific laws on the reshaping of the parishes (St. Michael's of Central Square, St. Mary's of Cleveland, St. Bernadette's of Constantia and the Sacred Heart of Cicero) and forming new parishes. He was introduced to speak on his experience in the process of reconfiguring and working with several parishes to share resources with the goal to meet the Diocese's current needs. This process was established to strengthen the diocese due to a shortage of priests, parishioners and donations needed to maintain parishes that Bishop Lucia oversees in the Syracuse Diocese. This is an ongoing effort meet the needs of Catholics in the Syracuse Diocese.

One of the trustees, Ellen Holst, of the Divine Mercy Parish and Mission of St. Bernadette, spoke of the experience the churches went through in this process as a parishioner's and trustee's perspective.

Ellen Holst, Trustee: Ellen talked about how St. Mary's of Cleveland and St. Bernadette's of Constantia had lower attendance and contributions to their parishes. St. Mary's became an Oratory church used for special masses and funerals for example. People became very angry and nasty because of this transition. This change occurred in 2018 and information about this change was not shared, it just happened. As a result, some former parishioners decided to attend the Methodist Church or walked away from their faith entirely. Staffing and attendance in fiscal year 2022 fell and there was backstabbing during this time. At the 3rd town hall on July 20, 2023, past members of the church were negative. Father looked at what was occurring and was uncertain how people would react after the closing of St. Mary's Church of Cleveland. By the end of 2023, there were 2 parishes and 1 family. People were going back and forth between existing churches. There were still sore feelings over the transitions. They had rosary night at the St. Mary's Oratory Church that had closed.

Ellen felt that town halls are a good thing. There are challenges to create a new mass schedule and people are adjusting. People are currently coming together at Masses and activities and there is more comradery. People do understand the reality of the hard facts the diocese is facing and are respectful. It is okay to grieve over the loss of their church.

Father Christopher Seibt: Father Christopher said there are lots of ways to do this. For example, 2 parishes sharing resources. In the big picture, things are changing rapidly: Christians of Apostolic Mission, Crises of faith, there is a shift. You must go to those who are struggling and invite people back to the parishes. At Divine Mercy/St Bernadette's churches, 70 people were attending weekly and donations were down, maintenance costs were going up. People saw the numbers and knew. So the question Fr. Christopher asked, What is your end game? You can't wait until the last minute; they knew this was the right time for the churches to make the final transition.

How we got there:

What is the goal? Father felt you need to pick a date, determine how to do it, with a goal of not losing anyone. You need a current census of all the parishes involved. You need an updated name and address database to make sure you have everyone in the system. Leaders in the transition need to be trained. At Divine Mercy, the bishop had a dinner at the last mass of the church, the old pews were made into memorial plaques, St. Mary's was sold, and St. Bernadette's was closed.

Father Seibt said that vibrant parishes don't struggle. Sacred Heart became the newly formed parish.

1. Modification of some sort. Parishes ABC now form Parish "D."
2. The Churches must come together, merge all the staff, the mass schedule will have to be modified to serve the needs of the parishioners and the priest's ability to handle the schedule.
3. Staff costs are astronomical; to merge the staff, you can offer better salaries to those staff members that remain.
4. Do we need all the parishes? You will have one main parish, are the other parishes in good shape? Can you still support them?
5. There will be a point in the future that some churches will be relegated as profane (not used for church services.)
6. St. Mary's of Cleveland had a \$20,000 fuel bill a year and it needed \$100,000 to maintain and keep it up. It was sold.
7. What is your Mass schedule? One daily mass at Divine Heart, 2 days at another church and 3 days at the last church. You need to have a survey of the people about the Mass scheduled on Sunday.
8. Confessions occur on Tuesday and Thursday. Father Seibt had one retired priest to come out of retirement for one year, now he will have to modify the

Mass/Confession/Baptism/Communion/Confirmation/funeral and wedding schedules to be able to serve the parish alone.

With the shortage of priests, those in the seminary will become merger priests. It is difficult to merge or close a church. It is sad, and not a happy “family” occurrence. What will the future look like in 5 years?

The questions to ask:

1. What is your Mass schedule? What is the Confession schedule?
2. What site will be the new parish?
3. There must be transparency...St. John's and St. Peter's have been in the loop, but St. Paul's has been out of the loop.
4. It looks like St. Paul's will become an Oratory Church for prayer and devotions, funerals and special occasions.
5. Bishop Lucia said anything can change. He said he felt bad that St. Paul's was not in the part of the process so far.
6. Evangelization is important as well as the social aspect of the parishes getting together. At the 4 pm mass, Fr. Christ said at social activities, “different hands” are helping. At Divine Mercy, everyone is involved, and at Sacred Heart, it is more culturally a traditional church.
7. You should have one “Floral Committee,” and a Communications Committee so that people did not hear changes by word of mouth, but by a summary in the church bulletin.
8. The Communications Committee needs to promote the new parish and changes by the Church websites, bulletins and social media.
9. The biggest losses of church members is after Confirmation. You must try to keep the kids coming. At his church, they must attend mass, kids disaffected must sign in for their classes and requirements to be confirmed.

Father Sean O'Brien: Father said that the finances are tricky, you have 5 parishes ABCDE becomes F, one parish.

1. The Finances will be collected by the main parish. In the merger 1 church will be designated and change its EIN number to the new parish name. Fr. Seibt said that is the easiest way. The rest of the churches will remain open but must have a minimal amount of donations to maintain the church.
2. The new parish has responsibility for the other churches. It will have restricted funds for each church that remains for its upkeep. All the donations will be part of the new parish's single entity general fund. It will have to be determined how much it costs to keep the church, “its future maintenance costs along with its current cost.”
3. Use of the churches, for example, St. Joseph's Day dinner could be held at St. Joseph's in Lee Center.

4. It won't be seamless; the new parish will begin to see who can do what well. It takes time for some things to work out. The value, heritage and traditions. For example, Transfiguration was home to the Polish immigrants, St. Peter's was originally a parish of 7 counties, St. Paul's was built for the Air Force Community.
5. We will be 1 family with all different cultures.

Subcommittees:

There is a need for subcommittees to be established. Fr. Sean and Fr. Paul had sign up sheets for the following committees:

- New name committee (will be involved in a process to get ideas from all the churches and select 3 or 4 names to become the umbrella name of the new parish.
- Finance committee be made up of trustees of the current churches.
- Faith Formation committee
- Social committee
- Communications committee to provide consistent information to all parishes.
- Cemetery committee
- Facilities committee

They need to set a date for a meeting, pick a date that works for most, you can't make everyone happy. They need to take minutes of their meeting and go to the parish council president with their minutes to be reported at the next parish council meeting. The same communications must be disseminated to all before the next meeting. Each committee needs a chairperson to act as a spokesperson for the group.

The first Town Hall will be at 10 am at St. Paul's church on July 16th. The next Parish Council meeting will be at St. Paul's on Tuesday, July 23rd.

The meeting was closed with a prayer.