

Saint Mary Parish | Saint Michael Parish

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Dear Parishioners of St. Mary and St. Michael Parishes,

Thank you for your support of the parishes and your participation in the life of our Catholic community in Hollidaysburg. We have come to a time when we need to make some changes. In this letter I will describe some of those changes and offer a basic plan for moving forward.

What is a Parish? Is It the Same as a Church?

Let's begin by considering what a parish is. Do the words "parish" and "church" mean the same thing? The Church is the community of believers whom Jesus himself calls together by the power of the Holy Spirit. In its widest sense, "church" refers to the Church throughout the world, the People of God called together by Jesus Christ under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, who is the successor of St. Peter. All other Catholic bishops are in unity with the pope. The worldwide Church is divided into specific territories. Each territory is a *particular church* (or *local church*) having its own bishop who is also a successor of the apostles. Another term for particular church is *diocese*. Within each particular church or diocese are parishes. These are usually geographical territories.

So, the first meaning of church is not a building. It is a gathering of the people of God under the direction of a successor of the apostles. Each church is made up of parishes. These parishes are led by a pastor (shepherd) who carries out the mission of the bishop. Most of the time, parishes have specific physical structures in which they meet for liturgy and other activities. A structure set apart for worship is called a *church* in English.

Why Do Parishes Merge?

Population loss has been the main reason for parish reconfiguration in our local church (diocese). We have far less people in our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown than we used to have. Secondly, we have fewer priests.

First, a little history. We claim our Catholic heritage primarily through the Servant of God, Father Demetrius Gallitzin, a Russian immigrant who, after receiving his full priestly formation and ordination in the United States (the first man to do this), was assigned to our

region by Bishop John Carroll, the Bishop of Baltimore, in 1798. Our current diocese was erected by Pope Leo XIII in 1901. The first bishop of our diocese was Bishop Eugene Garvey. Our diocese is comprised of eight counties in southern west-central Pennsylvania. These counties are Somerset, Cambria, Bedford, Blair, Huntingdon, Fulton, Centre, and Clinton.

In the Jubilee Year 1975, the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese had 134 parishes, the vast majority in Cambria County. These were served by at least 186 priests. In the Jubilee Year 2025, we have 87 parishes served by 81 priests. Of these, 54 are diocesan priests and 27 are religious order priests. Of the 54 diocesan priests who are able to help out in parishes, only 39 are not senior priests (usually 75 years old or older). Two of the 39 non-senior priests have been released for military service and will not return to our diocese until their service is completed. Currently we have zero men in any level of formation for the priesthood in our diocese.

Blair County remains the only county in our diocese with two parishes in its county seat, St. Mary and St. Michael the Archangel.

Merging the parishes of Hollidaysburg will create a single parish which is stronger than the two existing parishes. At the same time, because we recognize that we will have a shortage of priests for the foreseeable future, merging will allow us to have a single parish which one priest can handle more effectively.

What Happens in a Parish Merger?

From the point of view of Church law, in a merger of two or more parishes, the diocesan bishop issues a decree suppressing the existing parishes and subsequently establishes a new parish. So, it is the bishop, the shepherd of the particular church, who has the final say about how his parishes are configured.

This new parish takes on the combined regions served by the former parishes. The new parish may receive a new name. The new parish has one pastor, one pastoral council, one finance council, one set of sacramental records, one set of financial books, one liturgical schedule, one cathedraticum (diocesan tax) assessment, and so on. All the property and holdings of the former parishes become the property and holdings of the newly established parish. Church buildings which have been consecrated for divine worship retain their name even as they become part of a new parish. I should mention that parish cemeteries also retain their names although they are placed under the administration of a combined cemetery committee of the new parish.

According to civil (state and/or federal) law, the Bishop of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown is the trustee for each of the parishes within the diocese. This does not mean that the

bishop owns the real property and assets of the parish. It does not mean that the diocese owns parish property and assets. In simple terms, the parish property is held in trust and administered for the good of that parish. For the most part, the bishop is only involved if it is determined that church law is not being observed, and in matters which might jeopardize parish finances.

The management of all financial affairs of the parish must follow what is established in the Code of Canon Law, which applies to parishes everywhere. The pastor is the trust administrator with the responsibility of overseeing the financial affairs of the parish. Among the safeguards for the pastor's administrative responsibility, the pastor cannot act in a manner that exceeds certain limits that are established in church law. This includes consultation with the parish pastoral council and/or finance council as required by church law.

When the new parish is erected, all assets of the former parishes are transferred to new accounts which bear the Employer Identification Number (EIN) for the new parish. The new parish is listed in the *Kenedy Directory* as verification that the newly established parish is a non-profit organization and enjoys tax exempt status according to state and federal law. It is through the *Kenedy Directory* that the required 990 non-profit form is filed on behalf of charitable trusts.

Finally, it should be noted that all fundraising activities must be in compliance with diocesan policy and applicable state and federal law. No person or organization will receive authorization to raise funds on behalf of the parish without prior authorization from the pastor together with the parish finance council. This failure to obtain that authorization may have negative consequences which can be avoided by following the proper policies and procedures.

Parish Consultative and Leadership Bodies

As a way of aiding our parishes in their journey to unity, I am recommending to our Bishop that he suppress the current pastoral councils in favor of a new Provisional Pastoral Council. This Provisional Pastoral Council will initially have equal membership from both previous parishes. Nominations will be secured, and the Bishop and I will determine, in collaboration with the Leadership Team, the most appropriate make-up of the Provisional Pastoral Council. It will be the task of the Provisional Council to develop guidelines and procedures for a new Pastoral Council. The Provisional Pastoral Council as well as its succeeding Pastoral Council will publish reports of Pastoral Council meetings. After the guidelines and procedures have been developed, the Provisional Pastoral Council will give way to a more permanent Pastoral Council having members with defined terms. Members will be determined in keeping with diocesan policy and with the procedures developed by the Provisional Pastoral Council.

I am recommending to the Bishop that he permit our current Finance Council to remain in place. The Finance Council has been functioning as a single Council for both parishes for several years and already has significant representation of both previous parishes.

In keeping with a leadership model recommended by Divine Renovation, a diocesan-endorsed movement which encourages more effective leadership in the Church, I also intend to continue using a Leadership Team with whom I will meet weekly. This team is composed of both staff and volunteers. Periodically the Leadership Team and I will need to perform a review to ensure that the makeup of the Team reflects vital aspects of our parish life.

A chart which shows how I understand these bodies to function within the leadership of the parish is attached (see attachment).

Liturgical Schedule

Because we have no extra priests and because it is likely that Father Justin will be assigned as pastor of a parish in the next round of assignments to be announced on June 27, 2025, it is vital that we have a liturgy schedule designed for a single priest. This schedule will require all of us to be willing to make some compromises. It will also require the services of at least one senior priest. After consultation with the current Pastoral Councils and the Leadership Team, this is the new schedule which will begin on **Saturday, July 26, 2025**. The liturgical schedule may need to be tweaked as we move forward.

Weekend Mass Schedule for St. Mary-St. Michael Parishes

Saturday, 4:00pm, St. Mary Church
Sunday, 7:30am, St. Mary Church
Sunday 10:00am, St. Mary Church
Sunday 10:00am, St. Michael Church
Sunday 11:30am, St. Michael Church

Weekday Mass Schedule for St. Mary-St. Michael Parishes

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 7:45am, St. Michael Church
Wednesday, 6:30pm, St. Mary Church
Friday, 7:45am, St. Mary Church

Confession Schedule

Saturday, 1:00pm, St. Michael Church
Wednesday, 5:30pm, St. Mary Church
Thursday before First Friday, 4:00pm, St. Mary Church
Anytime by appointment

Baptism Schedule

Saturday, 5:00pm, St. Mary Church
Sunday, 12:30pm, St. Michael Church
During any weekend Mass
Other times as arranged privately

Wedding Schedule

Saturday 10am-2pm, St. Mary or St. Michael Churches
Other times as arranged privately

OCIA Schedule

Time TBD by candidates, St. Michael Convent

Liturgical Ministers

Parishioners who will be particularly impacted by our changes in the Mass schedule are liturgical ministers. I wish to thank them for their faithfulness, preparation, and diligence in their ministry. I hope they will continue to serve the needs of our parish as we move ahead. I would also like to remind all ministers that, when it comes to the liturgy, it is always more important to receive than to give. It should never be the case that a minister is present at church only when he or she is assigned to a specific task. This is also an important consideration for me. It's why it's important for me to have a yearly retreat and times of recollection when I can be nourished through the ministry of others.

Musicians

I am grateful to all who are willing to share their talents as parish musicians. As we rearrange the Mass schedule, my goal is to retain all current musicians—keyboardists, cantors, choir members, and so on. This will require that we have two keyboardists assigned to weekend Masses. Similarly, as we move into the new schedule, we will now be able to separate the role of psalmist from that of cantor. Because the psalmist sings a text from Sacred Scripture, it is preferred that this role be kept separate from that of cantor. Thus, we will need two vocal leaders per weekend Mass.

Lectors

We are already striving to have lectors read a single reading so that they may prepare it as well as possible. When there is no deacon present, we will also begin to assign a third reader to lead the universal prayer or prayer of the faithful.

Servers

We have had a hard time recruiting younger servers. I would like to make this more of a priority for the newly configured parish. Study after study has shown that servers, especially when they serve with those of the same sex, have a greater openness to vocations. Also, the liturgy is greatly enhanced when servers know what they are doing and carry out their role in a noble way. My hope is that we will have at least two servers present for every weekend Mass.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion

By combining some of the Masses, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion may not have to function as frequently, but I trust that they will remain committed to their ministry. Even more important is their ministry of taking Holy Communion to the sick and homebound members of the parish. This remains a big task going forward.

Ministers of Hospitality

As we move into a new situation as a combined parish, I would like to see us increase both the number of our ministers of hospitality as well as the degree of hospitality offered. Each parish church has three entrances. My hope is that we will have a hospitality team for each entrance. Ideally, having ministers of hospitality greeting people in the parking areas would also enhance this ministry.

Parish Staff

For some time, we have been anticipating a parish merger. The current parish staff members are already aligned with this merger and will continue to function as they have up to this point.

Contributions

Currently we have separate envelopes for St. Mary and St. Michael parishes. When the parish merger occurs, the separate bank accounts of each parish and their accounting will be merged. New envelopes will be issued. As is the case now, the new parish will produce charitable giving receipts for taxes. Finally, donations which have been restricted for particular purposes will remain as restricted donations in the accounting of the newly merged parish.

Parish-wide Meetings

I am having two public meetings to discuss your ideas and concerns as we move forward. You can attend either or both of these meetings. On Saturday, July 12, 2025, I will have a meeting at St. Mary Church beginning at 10:00am. On Saturday, July 19, 2025, I will have a meeting at St. Michael Church beginning at 10:00am. You may also see me privately by appointment.

I place our parish under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel as we move forward. In keeping with the People of God of all ages, we are moving into the undefined and unknown. Yet we trust in God the Father who has given us all a share in his Holy Spirit that what he has begun in Christ, he will bring to completion.

Yours in Christ,



(Very Rev.) Alan E. Thomas
Pastor

P.S. The following unity prayer was composed by parishioners of both St. Mary and St. Michael Parishes. I made small changes and then had it approved by our Bishop. Please pray it, asking for the unity that only the Holy Spirit can give.

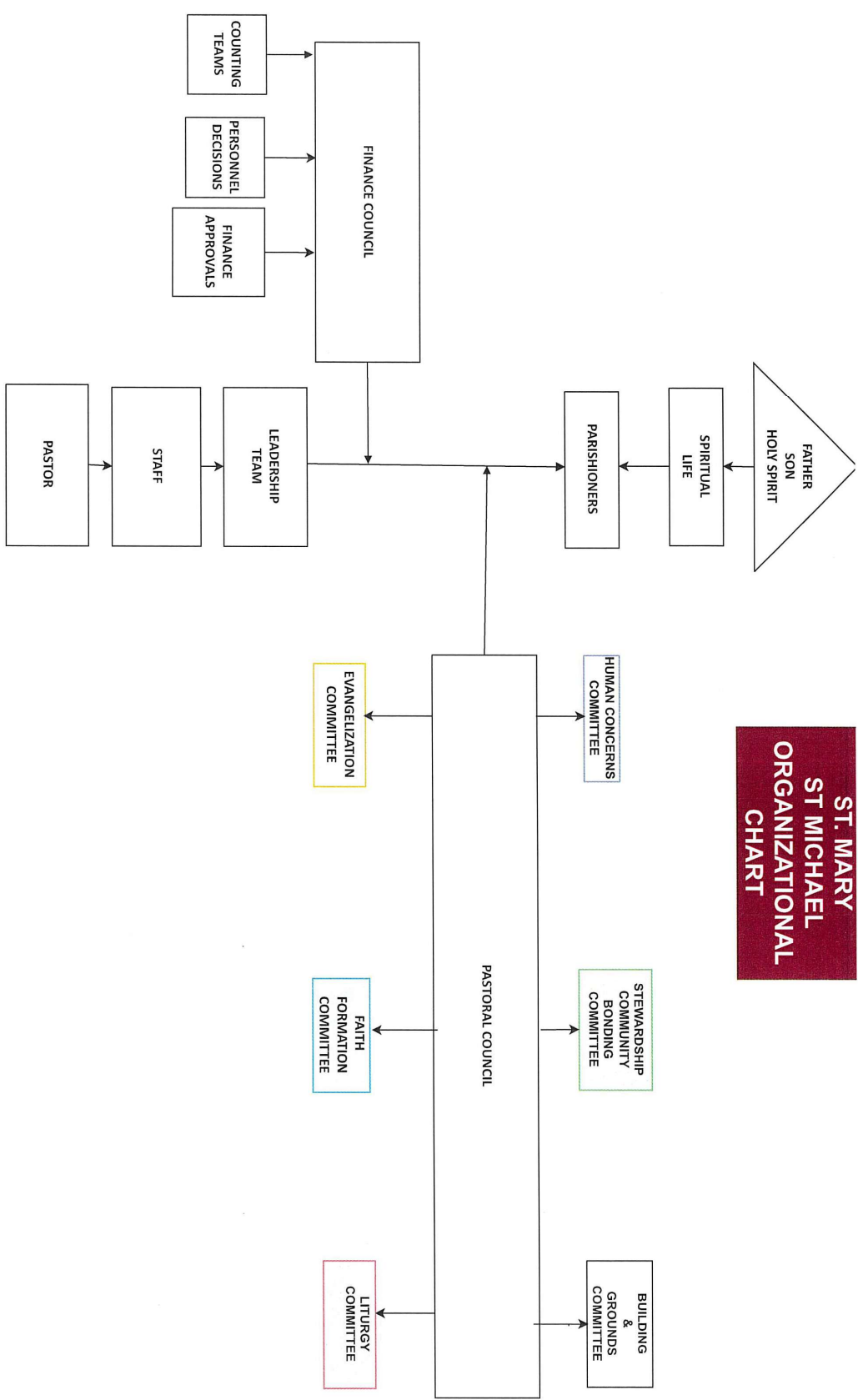
Come, Holy Spirit, Creator,
come from Thy bright heavenly throne.
Come, take possession of our hearts.
Bring true peace to our parish.

O Spirit, unite, strengthen, and rest upon us
that we may grow in the love of God.
Allow us to share our gifts with one another
as One Body in Christ.

We ask all of this, O Holy Spirit,
through the intercession
of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God,
and St. Michael the Archangel, Prince of Thy Church.

O come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

ST. MARY ST MICHAEL ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



Evangelization	Stewardship/ Community Bonding	Liturgy	Human Concern	FF	Buildings and Grounds
Alpha Small Groups Holy Spirit Ministry Mission Trip Men's Fellowship Women's Fellowship Library (Convent)	Prayer Pal Bereavement Soup Saturday Martha's Nativity Festival Basket Auction Christian Outreach Prayer Shawl Ministry Retired Priests' Christmas Gifts Greeting Cards Food for the Soul Valentine's Social Funeral Luncheons Over 80's Party Senior Card Games OCIA/New Member Social St. Andrew's Social Penance Service Meals Nativity Refreshments	Altar Servers Lectors Eucharistic Ministers Sacristans EM's Homebound/ Nursing Homes Hospitality Infused Organists Musicians Choir Members Cantors	Rice Bowls Christian Outreach ARW Collections Prayer Shawl Ministry Christmas in July (Vets) Senior Bags (Christmas & Easter) Blessing Tree Gloves, Hats, Scarves Collection (St. Vin. De Paul) Bulletins to Homebound Meal Ministry	OCIA Catechists Little Lambs Christian Outreach Easter Baskets Shoeboxes	Cemeteries Maintenance Building Evaluations
Media Bulletin Facebook Flocknote Instagram Parish Website		Thursday Rosary Funeral Planning Wedding Planning Legion of Mary First Friday Adoration Adoration Chapel Stations of the Cross May Crowning Sacramental Prep Church Environment (Decorations) Ministry Pro			