

Answering the question: ‘Why did my parish merge?’

With the vast majority of parish realignment in the Diocese of Buffalo completed, including the Sept. 1 merger of St. Mary Parish in Lockport with All Saints Parish and the Sept. 18 merger of St. Adalbert Parish in Buffalo with St. John Kanty and St. Stanislaus parishes (St. Mary and St. Adalbert are no longer worship sites), it is worth revisiting the rationale behind the process which has changed the landscape of Catholic parish life in the eight counties of Western New York.

When Bishop Edward U. Kmiec launched the Journey in Faith and Grace on June 9, 2005, he said, “To ensure that parishes will have the membership and resources to be vibrant centers of Catholic life, we must begin to lay the groundwork to make sure that our parishes will be able to carry on an effective ministry in the 21st century.” That is exactly what was done, and as a result, the Catholic experience has improved.

In the past six years, the diocese has gone from 274 parishes and missions to 164 parishes. We have 192 weekend worship sites, a reduction of 83. These decisions were not hastily made. Through extensive collaboration and discussion at the

parish, vicariate and diocesan levels, new parish configurations were agreed on, with Bishop Kmiec approving the recommendations that came from the local level and the diocesan Strategic Planning Commission.

When dealing with restructuring of this proportion, there will always be harsh criticism, heartbreak and reluctance to join a new parish. But the vast majority of Catholics in Western New York did what Bishop Kmiec asked of them, accepting and understanding these decisions.

The drop in the local Catholic population has roughly mirrored the overall population decline in Western New York. In 1960, there were 850,000 Catholics among the 1.7 million who resided in the region. Today, we have 633,550 Catholics living in Western New York, which now has 1.5 million residents.

Further exacerbating the problem is the dramatic decline in the number of diocesan priests available for ministry. In just the past 10 years, we have seen the number of priests available for ministry decline by 100 to 185. Through the Journey in Faith and Grace, we have pooled our resources and are closer to the number of parishes that are needed to provide pastoral care. This is especially

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true in our cities.

In changing the status of St. Adalbert Parish, the bishop followed Canon Law. When parishioners appealed to the Vatican to keep the parish open, the bishop’s decision was upheld at every level, including the Apostolic Signatura, the Vatican’s highest court. When St. Adalbert parishioners asked for clarification about how the church could be used, the Vatican responded that St. Adalbert Church “remained a place of worship, accessible to the faithful, but does not imply that Holy Mass needs to be celebrated there on a weekly basis.”

The pastoral situation in Lockport, meanwhile, can be compared to that of Olean, which is similar in size. Following restructuring, Olean now has two parishes staffed by two diocesan priests, and two churches no longer used for regular worship. (One in Portville.) Lockport now has two parishes (All

Saints and St. John the Baptist) and two churches, St. Mary and St. Joseph, that are not regular worship sites, with two diocesan priests. Parishes in both cities are also assisted by religious order priests.

The separate merger decisions involving St. Mary and St. Adalbert have been extremely difficult for many to accept. That is certainly understandable when considering the long, storied history of both parishes, and their contributions to the community. But many other vibrant parishes in the diocese were also asked to merge, forming even more vibrant faith communities. Peg Merrill of Lockport recently wrote in the *Lockport Sun & Journal* about joining All Saints after being a member of St. Bridget’s in Newfane for many years. “The worship experience was different in each parish, but the holy faith so dear to me was the same in every community.”

It is disheartening to hear some Catholics whose churches have closed say they will not join another parish. As Bishop Kmiec has said, “Although our parish structures have changed, we remain the one Body of Christ and we share the one bread and the one cup. This must be at the heart of our faith and at the heart of our worship experience.”