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Bishop McDonnell holds press conference; discusses parish changes in four areas of Springfield Diocese



By Terence Hegarty
and Sharon Roulier

SPRINGFIELD – In an ongoing effort to give the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Springfield “a new vitality,” Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell has announced plans to consolidate parishes in five of its regions. Eleven churches will close within the next five months, the bishop said at an Aug. 11 press conference.

Bishop McDonnell decided earlier this week, after consultation with the Presbyteral Council, to implement the changes, which were recommended by the diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee (PPC).

“Realistically, what this is all about is being church better,” said Bishop McDonnell.

“We’ve been putting money into buildings, rather than into people,” he said. “We’ve been building up church buildings, rather than building up church communities.”

However, the bishop did acknowledge that all of the parishes held special memories for Catholics in the Diocese of Springfield. “I know that every church is a memory box,” he said. “For so many people, the highlights of life – baptisms and funerals, weddings, first Communions, confirmations – so many joys, so many sorrows. The memories are there. I know that. And I know it’s tough to let go.”

“But the interesting thing is, the memories stay, even when the buildings are gone,” he said.

The changes, which involve closings and mergers, will occur in southern and northern Berkshire County; Franklin County; and the Agawam, West Springfield and Westfield areas. Details of the reconfigurations were announced during Masses last weekend.

All of the changes are due to be implemented by Jan. 1, 2009. The changes, listed below, are presented by region (the groups the diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee divided the diocese into as they conducted their analyses).

Only the parishes where changes are being implemented are detailed here. The changes for each region are as follows:

Region 1, North Adams Region

In Adams, the merged Notre Dame des Sept Douleurs and St. Thomas Aquinas Parish and St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish are to be combined into one parish. The report recommends that the resulting parish entity “consolidate the existing structures.” The parishes are presently linked, sharing one pastor.

The bishop announced that the facility to remain open will be Notre Dame Church and the new parish will be called Pope John Paul the Great.

North American Martyrs Parish in Lanesborough will be closed because “it is very close to three other parishes and only seats 123 people in the church,” said the bishop.

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish in Cheshire will remain open. However, the report states, “In the event that the number of priests falls below expectation, St. Mary would lose its resident priest.”

In North Adams, the parishes of St. Anthony, St. Francis of Assisi and Our Lady of Mercy will be merged into one parish with a new name – St. Elizabeth of Hungary. St. Francis and Our Lady of Mercy Church buildings will close and the St. Anthony facilities are to become the main worship and ministerial site.

“The two churches in North Adams are named for Franciscan saints,” said the bishop. “And the third is Our Lady of Mercy. And St. Elizabeth of Hungary was a Franciscan saint who brought other Franciscans together and had a great devotion to Our Lady. So, she carries on the tradition of the three (parishes).”

Region 3, Lee Region

In Housatonic, All Saints and Corpus Christi parishes will be merged into one parish to be called Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, said the bishop; Corpus Christi Church in Housatonic will be the church that remains open.

St. Joseph Parish in Stockbridge will become a mission of St. Mary Mother of the Church Parish in Lee.

In the communities of Lenox, Lenox Dale and West Stockbridge, the current configuration is to remain. The report states, however, “If the number of priests serving South Berkshire County declines below expectations, then the parish in Lenox Dale (St. Vincent de Paul) should be closed if the pastor is required to minister to an

additional community.”

In Sheffield, the committee stated that “if the number of priests drops below expected levels, Our Lady of the Valley could lose its resident pastor.”

Region 4, Greenfield Region

In Millers Falls, St. John Parish will close.

Concerning Turners Falls, the Pastoral Planning Committee stated in their report that it “believes that the community in Turners Falls is best served by one resident pastor.” (There are currently two pastors there, one each at Our Lady of Czestochowa Parish and Our Lady of Peace Parish.) However, the report did not specify a date when this change should occur, stating only, “We recommend that the parishes in Turners Falls work toward the day when there is one resident pastor.”

The areas of Shelburne Falls, Charlemont and Colrain were addressed without a deadline or specifics for change. The report took into consideration that a new pastor had recently been assigned to the one parish (St. Joseph’s in Shelburne Falls) and the missions of St. Christopher’s in Charlemont and St. John’s in Colrain.

Referring to the fact that the closing of one or both of the missions had been considered, the report states, “We recommend that the incoming pastor be given the pastoral latitude to assess the mission question for himself in consultation with the affected communities.”

In South Deerfield, St. Stanislaus and St. James parishes will be merged. The new parish will utilize one set of buildings and adopt the new name of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Parish. . St. Mark Mission in Conway (currently a mission of St. James Parish) is to remain a mission of the merged parish.

The new name is reminiscent of the time of the Deerfield Massacres, said the bishop.

“There was a blessed in the church who prayed for peace. Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. She was a Mohawk Indian, and so the new parish coming into existence, she is being named the patroness of that new parish,” he said.

Region 10, Agawam Region

In Agawam, All Saints Parish, which utilizes two church buildings, will be closed.

In Westfield, the committee recommended that all parishes in Westfield remain as currently configured “as long as the number of diocesan priests available for assignment does not fall beneath projections. If it does,” the report continues, “we recommend that St. Peter/St. Casimir be considered for closing.”

In West Springfield, St. Louis de France Parish and St. Ann Mission will be closed.

“There, we not only went through the listening sessions,” said the bishop, “but we did a physical analysis of each of the buildings.” “It is apparent to us,” the committee wrote in the Region 10 report, “that retaining Immaculate Conception as the parish for this area (of West Springfield) is the best option.”

A new parish will be called St. Frances Xavier Cabrini after the patron saint of immigrants, because both St. Ann and St. Louis de France had large immigrant populations.

Regarding Chester, Huntington and Russell, the report states that the two parishes and one mission in that cluster that are currently being served by one priest “remain as currently configured unless the number of available diocesan priests declines beyond projections. If that were to occur, we recommend that an alternative staffing arrangement be considered.”

Director of pastoral planning for the diocese, Msgr. John J. Bonzagni, said the changes are necessary so that the future of the Catholic Church in the diocese will be secure.

However, he did not dismiss the pain that many of these changes will inevitably cause.

“People really love their parishes, they love their priests. They love their church,” he said. “And that’s a fantastic thing. And you can’t get upset about something you don’t care about. Our people care, and they care deeply. And we’re trying to deal with them respectfully.”

“But, I think, people will find that the result (of the reconfigurations) will be a much more secure footing. Parishes will be able to do things that they can’t do now because they’re living hand to mouth, not just financially but ministerially.”

He noted that while some of the decisions of the committee were difficult, after thorough input from both parishioners and priests of each area, and much of their own analysis, the decisions were often “the only things that made sense, both financially and spiritually.”

Msgr. Bonzagni said he wants to be sure that people know that even though their ideas about reconfiguration of parishes may not have been implemented, their concerns were taken into account.

“We can’t meet with everybody,” he said. “But people need to know that their ideas haven’t been left out (of the process). It’s important for people to know that there’s no idea that hasn’t been voiced.”

Voices were heard through what the PPC called “listening sessions” which began last fall in the diocese. As part of the pastoral planning process, each region will have two listening

sessions at which Msgr. Bonzagni and PPC members hear the input of parishioners and clergy.

One session, in which pastors, clergy and pastoral leaders participate, is held. And then another session, for lay representatives of each parish in the region, is conducted. Nearly all of the listening sessions for all 10 regions of the diocese have been conducted.

There is one more set of listening sessions to be held, which is for the Ware Region. Some of the parishes from the Springfield Region will be included in that session.

With the completion of these four reports and the Pittsfield region, the PPC still has five regional reports to write and submit to Bishop McDonnell.

Msgr. Bonzagni said the other regions are in various stages of the pastoral planning process and that reports will be released as they are completed.

The Catholic Communications Corporation will be providing ongoing coverage of this story, including feedback from parishioners, on www.iobserve.org.

(Editor's note: Reporter Terence Hegarty is a member of the Pastoral Planning Committee.)

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