



## DECREE

### EFFECTING THE MERGER OF SAINT MARY OF THE ASSUMPTION PARISH (FRENCHVILLE) INTO SAINT AGNES PARISH (MORRISDALE)

#### History

##### **A. Saint Mary of the Assumption, Frenchville**

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish emerged from a very unique ethnic community which still exists today. Immigrants from the French regions of Normandy and Piccardy, many of them Catholic, settled in Frenchville in the early 1800's. Their French character has remained for nearly two hundred years. The residents continued to speak French into the 1970's, and many residents today still claim French ancestry. The first Mass in Frenchville was celebrated in 1834 in a private home. For the rest of the decade, the Catholics there were visited occasionally by traveling priests, and even by the Bishop of Philadelphia, Francis Patrick Kenrick. Eventually the faithful built a rough log church which was dedicated by Bishop Kenrick in 1840. In that same year, Bishop Kenrick appointed the first pastor of Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish. In 1844 Saint Mary of the Assumption was administered by the pastor of Saint John Parish in Bellefonte, about 40 miles away. It was then given to the care of the Redemptorist Fathers in Elk County, before receiving another resident pastor in 1846. The present church was dedicated in 1870. Saint Mary of the Assumption has cared for several missions over the years, including Sacred Heart, LeContes Mills (closed in 1968) and Saints John and Paul, Karthaus (closed in 2005). In 1994 Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish was entrusted with the care of the missions of Saint Severin, Drifting and Saints Peter and Paul, Grassflat.

##### **B. Saint Agnes, Morrisdale**

The early Catholic settlers of Morrisdale Mines were cared for by the pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish in Osceola Mills. The first Saint Agnes church building was built in 1891, about 20 years after the town was established. Saint Agnes church was built at the same time and with the same design as Saint Severin church in the community now known as Drifting. In 1894, care of the mission at Saint Agnes was transferred to the pastor of Saint Severin. Morrisdale Mines was a bigger community, however, so in 1896 the pastor transferred his residence there and Saint Severin became a mission of Saint Agnes for the next 100 years. The current church was built in 1964-1965 and dedicated in 1966. One hundred years after they were separated, Saint Agnes Parish was partnered again with Immaculate Conception Parish in Osceola Mills. It also took over care of the mission of Saints Peter and Paul in Hawk Run. Together these communities became known as the "Central Moshannon Cluster."



## **Current Situation**

At the present, St. Agnes Parish in Morrisdale has responsibility for the secondary mission church of Saints Peter and Paul in Hawk Run. Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish in Frenchville has responsibility for Saints Peter and Paul church in Grassflat and Saint Severin church in Drifting – both of which are presently secondary mission churches.

Clearfield County has experienced significant demographic changes in recent decades. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the overall population of Clearfield County has decreased by more than 5,400 people – a decline of 6.5% in the period from the year 2000 to 2022. The decline in both the general and Catholic population of the area – combined with the decreasing number of available priests – necessitates the reconfiguration of parishes and the better use of resources in order to assure the proper care of souls in central Clearfield County.

The Diocese of Erie's comprehensive pastoral planning process began in 2014. In the years that followed, vicariate and deanery meetings were held throughout the diocese to gather information and ideas from pastors, parish leaders and parishioners in general. As the demographic conditions in the Clearfield Deanery changed in recent decades, the need for parish reconfiguration and the better use of material and human resources became more urgent.

On March 9, 2023, Bishop Persico presented Presbyteral Council with a preliminary plan for parish reconfiguration in the Clearfield Deanery. The original proposal suggested that, among other possibilities, Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish be merged into St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Clearfield, and the secondary mission churches of Saint Severin, Drifting, and Saints Peter and Paul, Grassflat, become part of Saint Agnes Parish in Morrisdale. The preliminary plan was opened for discussion among members of the Council.

On March 20, 2023, at deanery meeting held at St. Francis School in Clearfield, Bishop Persico presented the Clearfield Deanery preliminary plan to the clergy of the deanery and a representative group of lay leaders from each parish. The Bishop then opened a several-week period of comment and feedback for pastors and people to give their views on the proposed changes.

At its May 10, 2023, meeting, the Presbyteral Council reviewed feedback from the pastors and people of the Clearfield Deanery regarding the proposed preliminary plan. Many alternatives to the preliminary plan for the eastern region of Clearfield County were proposed in the feedback.

At the June 22, 2023, meeting of the Presbyteral Council, Bishop Persico presented a finalized proposal for parish reconfigurations in Clearfield County. The Presbyteral Council did not come to a consensus on the best proposed configuration for Saint Mary of the Assumption and Saint Agnes Parishes – and their affiliated secondary churches. Before voting on a recommendation for the Bishop, the Council wished to consult further with the pastor of the involved parishes, Father William Barron, as well as former pastors and parish leaders in eastern Clearfield County. This consultation took place.

At its September 7, 2023 meeting, the Presbyteral Council was presented with additional insights from the local pastors and parish leaders. After robust discussion among the members, the Council voted unanimously to recommend to the Bishop that Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish, along with its secondary churches in Grassflat and Drifting, be merged into Saint Agnes Parish, Morrisdale. The result would be Saint Agnes Parish possessing 5 church buildings: Saint Agnes church, Morrisdale, being the parish church, Saint Severin church, Drifting, being a secondary mission church, and Saint Mary of the Assumption church, Frenchville, Saints Peter and Paul church, Grassflat, and Saints Peter and Paul church, Hawk run, all as secondary churches.

This final plan was announced to the clergy and people of the Clearfield Deanery at a meeting held on Wednesday, October 25, at Saint Francis School in Clearfield.

In the weeks following the October 25 announcement of the final plan, parishioners of Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish entered into dialogue with Bishop Persico recommending consideration of other possibilities for the parish's reconfiguration. Bishop Persico and Father Rouch spoke with several parishioners (by phone and in person) to discuss other possibilities. Fr. William Barron was also consulted. The result of these discussion was a modification of the final plan: Saint Mary of the Assumption would still merge into Saint Agnes Parish. However, Saint Mary of the Assumption church would now have the status of a secondary mission church – meaning that holy day and Sunday Mass will be celebrated there.

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

---

Therefore, having first and foremost before my eyes the need for a stronger and more sustainable means to provide for the care of souls for the faithful of the whole of Clearfield County, while also considering the challenges presented by demographic decline and the reduced number of priests; the genuine desire on the part of parishioners and clergy alike to realign parish structures to best situate them for building a strong future; the envisioning of this merger as an integral part of the overall pastoral plan for the Clearfield area<sup>1</sup>; I hereby decree the following:

1. By means of an extinctive union, Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish, Frenchville, shall be merged and subsumed into Saint Agnes Parish, Morrisdale.
2. The name of the receiving parish shall continue to be Saint Agnes Parish. It shall be territorial in nature, with the parish retaining all of the territory which it now possesses, and to it will be added all of the territory of Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish.
3. All sacramental records from Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish shall be retained at the parish offices of Saint Agnes Parish.

---

<sup>1</sup> The pastoral plan for the Clearfield area includes the following goals: to: 1) create a more vibrant Catholic community, 2) improve Mass attendance and participation in parish life, 3) engage younger Catholics, 4) reach out to fallen-away Catholics and new parishioners, 5) increase the parish's community and ecumenical involvement, 6) create a more welcoming environment, and 7) sustain the parish financially.

4. In accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 121), all of the assets, responsibilities, and liabilities of Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish shall be transferred to Saint Agnes Parish.
5. The parish church shall be Saint Agnes church in Morrisdale.
6. Saint Severin church, Drifting, and Saint Mary of the Assumption church, Frenchville, shall become secondary mission churches of Saint Agnes Parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is permitted in Saint Severin and Saint Mary of the Assumption churches.
7. Saints Peter and Paul church (Grassflat), and Saints Peter and Paul church (Hawk Run) shall both become secondary churches, but without mission status, of Saint Agnes parish. By diocesan law, therefore, Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, as well as on the evening preceding them, is not permitted in those church buildings.
8. Furthermore, the aforementioned churches in Grassflat and Hawk Run are to remain open to the faithful at least occasionally for sacred worship, whether public or private (cf. can. 1214).
9. As required by law, Mass is to be celebrated in each church every year on the solemnity of the church's title, in accord with current liturgical norms (cf. cann. 1167 §2 and 1168 of the former Code of Canon Law, and can. 2 of the present Code). If such an observance is impeded by another date of higher rank according to the Roman calendar, the impeded solemnity is to be transferred to the first available date thereafter.
10. The new boundaries of Saint Agnes Parish shall be:  
 In Clearfield County: Starting at the northwest corner of Girard Township, east along the Clearfield County line; then south along the Clearfield/Centre County line to US route 322; northeast along US route 322 to state road 2007; south along state road 2007 to state road 2024 (Old Erie Pike); west along state road 2024 to state road 2051; north along state road 2051 to state road 2049; north along state road 2049 to state road 2030; west along state road 2030 to the juncture with state road 1012 at Woodland; north along state road 2049 to PA route 970; north along PA route 970 to Shawville; east along the Susquehanna River to the Girard township boundary; north along the Goshen/Girard township line to the county line.

This decree is effective December 2, 2023, the beginning of Advent. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at the Chancery  
of the Diocese of Erie

on this 17th day of November, 2023

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL  
Bishop of Erie

*Christopher J. Singer*

The Reverend Christopher J. Singer, JCL  
Chancellor