

Massachusetts diocese announces parish closings, reconfigurations

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. – The Springfield Diocese announced parish reconfigurations and 19 parish closings during Aug. 29-30 weekend Masses.

Diocesan officials held a press briefing Aug. 27 in Springfield, detailing the changes. The information was embargoed until the evening of Aug. 29 so parishioners would have the opportunity to learn of the changes in their own parishes.

Springfield Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell met with the pastor of each parish that will be affected and wrote a letter for each parish to be read at the Masses.

“There’s going to be hurt, and I wish there weren’t,” the bishop told reporters. “But, at the same time, we are a pilgrim people. And church is meant to be a pilgrim people. Church is meant to be people on the move.”

Monsignor John J. Bonzagni, director of the diocese’s Pastoral Planning Office, said the changes are needed because of a change in demographics, a decline in the number of clergy and financial pressures.

“What we have tried to do is now get the diocese on a stable footing, remove the anxiety of whether this building’s going to be used, should we repair the roof?” he said. “Now let’s continue to build and continue to grow. So, what we hope we’re doing is really empowering for the growth of the church.”

Announcements of the closings at weekend Masses drew reactions of sadness and begrudging acceptance from parishioners in the diocese.

“You find a church and then it’s ripped out from under you,” said Sharon Heston, a parishioner of Sacred Heart Parish in Northampton after the 6:45 a.m. Mass Aug. 30, during which the pastor read a letter from the bishop stating that Sacred Heart Parish would close.

John Steidler, another Sacred Heart parishioner, told The Catholic Observer,

newspaper of the Springfield Diocese, that he thinks the decision to close the parish “is really going to hurt.”

After the 9 a.m. Mass Aug. 30 at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Holyoke, parishioner Bill Colangelo said he was thrilled his parish was not slated to close immediately. The parish is to link with St. Jerome Parish before the end of this year and the two parishes are to be merged in two years.

Remarking on the changes across the diocese, Colangelo said: “Nothing ever stays the same. I think the most important thing is that we have churches to go to. It would be nice if they all could stay open, but they can’t. I think we all have to face financial changes in a realistic way. We all have to move forward.”

Most of the changes are scheduled to take place before the end of the year. However, reconfigurations for some communities will take place two years from now.

The changes were recommended by the 12-member Pastoral Planning Committee following detailed analysis and input from parishioners of every parish and mission in the diocese. Members of the committee began their work more than three years ago.

Committee members were charged by Bishop McDonnell with formulating a way to provide “every Catholic in western Massachusetts fair and equitable access to the sacraments.”

According to Monsignor Bonzagni, if the diocese had not begun this pastoral planning effort and implemented changes to area parishes, there would have been “a slow trickle of parish by parish failing.”

He noted that the recommendations were made following a great deal of input from more than 1,000 parishioners from across the diocese. Listening sessions were held in every area of the diocese over a nearly two-year period.

In most cases where a merger is to take place, the Pastoral Planning Committee recommended that a new name be selected for the merged parish, something that has already been done in many of the recent mergers across the diocese.

Three prior pastoral planning efforts had been started in the diocese since 1980, but were not completed. Bishop McDonnell said he believes that a combined church community strengthens the faith of everyone involved.

“There’s a large community worshipping together and that large community provides vitality and that large community provides possibility for new ministries and new outreach and new ways of reaching people,” he said. “We have to focus on building up church, not church buildings.”