

Mountain Maryland parishes reduce Mass offerings

Responding to the priest shortage and low attendance, St. Gabriel in Barton and St. Mary of the Annunciation in Lonaconing have stopped celebrating weekend Masses.

The change went into effect at the start of Advent shortly before the Mass schedule was also reorganized for other parishes and missions in western Allegany and northern Garrett counties.

St. Gabriel and St. Mary are among six churches that make up a united faith community headed by Father James Hannon. Until recently, Father Hannon was assisted by two associate pastors, Father Ty Hullinger, who now serves as priest administrator of St. Mary in Cumberland and St. Patrick in Mount Savage, and Father Patrick Besel, the newly appointed director of the Cardinal Keeler House of Discernment in Baltimore.

Father Hullinger will be responsible for Masses at St. Patrick, a parish that had previously been led by Father Hannon along with his six current churches.

With the departure of Fathers Hullinger and Besel, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien appointed Capuchin Franciscan Father Michael Masich to assist Father Hannon with sacramental ministry at the six parishes and work in area hospitals.

Father Hannon noted that St. Gabriel and St. Mary were each averaging fewer than 50 people a week for their weekend Masses.

"Distance and availability of Mass close by was another factor in the decision," Father Hannon said.

St. Mary is less than three miles from St. Joseph in Midland and less than nine miles from St. Peter in Westernport and St. Michael in Frostburg, he said. St. Gabriel is less than five miles from St. Peter.

"Asking people to join with others in the area will, I hope, provide further

connections between the communities and give life to the liturgies in our other parishes,” Father Hannon said. “I hope that those who were attending Mass at St. Mary’s in Lonaconing and St. Gabriel’s in Barton might bring their gifts and talents to the other churches.”

Father Hannon said it appears that most people from St. Gabriel and St. Mary have chosen to attend Mass at St. Peter, while some go to St. Joseph or St. Michael.

St. Mary and St. Gabriel will continue offering Masses on holy days and for weddings and funerals. Daily Mass is celebrated at four parishes: once a week each at St. Mary and St. Joseph, four times a week at St. Michael, and three times at St. Peter. Masses are also celebrated in the five nursing homes within the parish boundaries.

Parishioners are encouraged to consult the bulletin for any changes in the daily Mass schedule.

Father Ed Hendricks, chaplain at Frostburg State University, and Monsignor Paul Byrnes, a retired priest, also assist at the six parishes by celebrating Masses.

The revised schedule for all six churches gives two priests the ability to cover all the Masses in a weekend and provides the faithful ample opportunities to attend Mass within a reasonable distance, Father Hannon said.

“It also allows the priests to celebrate the Eucharist in a way that does not rush them,” said Father Hannon, whose sixth parish is St. Ann, Grantsville. “It gives us the opportunity to approach the Mass in a prayerful way.”

The pastor acknowledged that the changes have been difficult.

“While some are very sad to have seen the day come when their home church no longer has a regular weekend Mass, they have expressed that they understand,” he said. “Many have expected these changes to have come at some point.”

Knowing that they can be buried from the church in which they grew up is a source of comfort to many of the parishioners of St. Mary and St. Gabriel, Father Hannon said.

Auxiliary Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, whose Seton Vicariate includes Western Maryland, said that the changes allow parishes to retain their identities, and was necessary because of the priest shortage.

“It’s difficult, particularly for those towns that have such a long and rich history,” he said. “They don’t have the population they once had. The industries aren’t there. The mining isn’t there.”