



3.16.2024

Status of St. Stephen Church in Oil City changes

Father John Miller, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Oil City, announced on March 16 that the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, after consultation with the presbyteral council, has relegated St. Stephen Church in Oil City, a secondary church of St. Joseph Parish, to “profane but not sordid use.”

The technical designation refers to the canon law process by which a bishop removes the blessing or consecration of a church building. Through that process, the building ceases to be reserved for divine worship, and therefore, can be used for non-religious purposes.

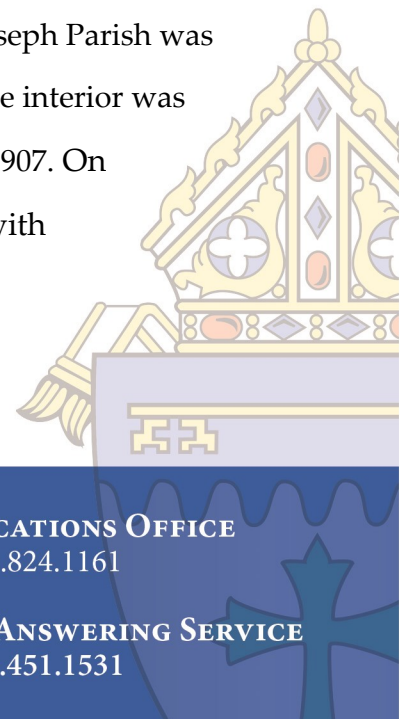
The designation is the result of a process that occurs when a pastor, with the support of the parish finance council and the parish pastoral council, believes a church building can no longer be maintained for any of a variety of reasons and petitions the bishop to relegate the church.

St. Stephen was established in 1898 when the parish territory of St. Joseph Parish was divided. The present St. Stephen Church was dedicated in 1907. Although the interior was renovated in the early 1950s, the structure remains the same as that built in 1907. On January 1, 2020, St. Stephen Parish was merged into Saint Joseph Parish with

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St. Stephen Church receiving the status of a secondary mission church. In the fall of 2023, the St. Stephen Church building was reduced to a secondary church without mission status (i.e. no Mass on Sundays, holy days or the evenings preceding them).

Beginning in 2018, serious concerns arose when stones began falling from the two steeple towers of St. Stephen Church. Temporary emergency measures were put in place to prevent other stones from dislodging, but it was clear major decisions needed to be made concerning the future of the building. Various engineering and structural studies estimated a cost in excess of \$3.4 million to make the building usable for the long term. A January 2024 notice from the Oil City director of Code Enforcement sited several severe building code violations.

Recognizing the dire condition of St. Stephen Church, Father Miller, with the unanimous support of both the parish finance council and the parish pastoral council, petitioned the bishop to request that St. Stephen Church be relegated to profane but not sordid use.

A complete history of the church, as well as a detailed narrative of the current situation, is described in the decree announcing the bishop's decision, now available at www.ErieRCD.org/bishop/decrees.html. The decree is effective March 18, 2024.

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