



May 6, 2025

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With this letter, I am attaching the decree that merges Our Lady of the Assumption Parish, Saint Jude Parish, and Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Beloit and Saint Stephen Parish in Clinton into a brand-new parish, Queen of Martyrs.

This moment comes for your new parish following years of consultation and preparation with our Into the Deep Strategic Plan begun back in the spring of 2022. Your new parish name, Queen of Martyrs, beautifully combines the various parishes that are being merged. Saint Stephen is called the Protomartyr, the first witness to Jesus to give his life in testimony to his faith. The Apostles Thomas and Jude gave their lives as martyrs to their faith in the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus. Finally, Mary suffered a martyrdom in spirit as she stood at the foot of the Cross, allowing a sword of sorrow to pierce her heart. It is also fitting that your new parish is created on the Optional Memorial of Saint Damien de Veuster, another type of martyr who spent his life in loving service to people with leprosy on Moloka'i, even as Hansen's disease eventually took his own life. Beloit has a connection to Saint Damien in Brother Joseph Dutton. All of these inspiring witnesses gave their lives because they believed in the love and salvation given to them and the whole world in Jesus Christ. As your new parish is created, my prayer is that you can all become faithful witnesses to the Lord's great love for each and every person. Making Christ known and loved by all people is at the root of why we undertook Into the Deep in the first place – so we could more effectively “make disciples” of Jesus Christ. This has been one of the most important parts of my episcopal ministry in the Diocese of Madison, and I pray that your new parish will truly serve as a center of holiness and missionary zeal leading people to Christ and His Church.

I am also happy to appoint Rev. Bart Timmerman as your pastor and to confirm Rev. James Murphy and Rev. Lawrence Oparaji as your parochial vicars. These dedicated priests, along with your parish staff, have already worked hard to prepare for this moment, and I fully trust that the Lord will guide their ministry in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Please know of my prayers for all of you, and I will look forward to celebrating this milestone when I come to install Fr. Bart as your pastor in the near future.

In the Risen Christ,

✠ Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison

Enclosure

O F F I C E O F T H E B I S H O P

Diocese of Madison • 702 S. High Point Road • Suite 225 • Madison, WI 53719
Phone: 608-821-3002 • Fax: 608-440-2809 • Email: officeofbishop@madisondiocese.org



Donaldus Iosephus
Miseratione Divina et Apostolicae Sedis Gratia
Episcopus Madisonensis

DECREE OF CANONICAL MERGER

**Uniting Our Lady of the Assumption Parish, Saint Jude Parish,
Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, and Saint Stephen Parish into**

QUEEN OF MARTYRS PARISH

in Rock County in the State of Wisconsin

Protocol No.: 250506-DB01

WHEREAS “the diocesan Bishop should be concerned to organize the arrangement of parishes in ways adapted to the care of souls, according to an inclusive and organic vision with wide pastoral outreach,” and “If the good of the faithful so requires, the Bishop should proceed, after consulting the diocesan presbyteral council, to alter territorial boundaries, to divide parishes that are too large, to merge small parishes, to establish new parishes or non-territorial centers for pastoral service in the community, or even to reorganize completely the arrangement of parishes within a particular city” (Directory *Apostolorum successores*, 214); and

WHEREAS “specific attention should be given to the following aspects, all of which form part of the model of parish life, thereby increasing pastoral effectiveness: Priestly collaboration...; Participation of the faithful (clerics, religious and laity)...; Parish associations...; [and] Centers of formation” (Ibid., 211); and

WHEREAS, however, the aforementioned aspects have suffered in the current general situation of the Diocese of Madison due to a shortage of clergy, difficulties in recruiting competent staff and volunteers to conduct necessary pastoral programming, and declining participation of the faithful in the sacramental and charitable activities of the Church for various reasons (e.g., increasing secularization, decreasing population in certain rural areas of the Diocese, the aftereffects of the Covid pandemic, etc.), prompting a comprehensive Diocesan strategic planning initiative undertaken in the spring of 2022, in consultation with a number of priests and competent lay faithful, to consider statistical data regarding demographics, Mass attendance, reception of the

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sacraments, numbers of youth in Catholic schools and faith formation programs, priest resources, and financial giving; and

WHEREAS the results of the strategic study were collated and shared first with priests, deacons, religious, and key lay people from August through October 2022 and then with the entire Diocese online and in a special edition of the *Catholic Herald*, the Diocesan newspaper, dated 10 November 2022, containing information in both English and Spanish; and

WHEREAS the print and online publications of the study included a proposed map restructuring the parishes of the Diocese and invited all interested parties to offer feedback, suggested changes, or questions during a period spanning from November 2022 through December 2022; and

WHEREAS the general factors prompting the strategic planning initiative were found to be operative in the specific circumstances of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Beloit, of Saint Jude Parish in Beloit, of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Beloit, and of Saint Stephen Parish in Clinton, in a manner and degree suggesting that the pastoral care of the faithful within those parishes would be much more effectively and expediently achieved through the union of the respective parishes; and

WHEREAS the initial proposal suggested merging the four above-mentioned parishes given that three of the parishes serve the same city, that all four parishes have collaborated to some degree in the past, and that the parishes are relatively close in terms of geographical distance, and the feedback obtained through the process of consultation did not propose any reconfiguration of the parish grouping; and

WHEREAS in March of 2023 the parishes of Our Lady of the Assumption, Saint Jude, Saint Thomas the Apostle, and Saint Stephen were grouped together to become “Pastorate 12,” both to coordinate pastoral action in the short term and further to discern the prudence of an eventual merger, and on 1 July 2023 the Reverend Bart Timmerman was named Parochial Administrator for each of the respective parishes of the pastorate; and

WHEREAS, in order to gather the necessary information and proofs concerning each proposed alteration of parish structures in the Into the Deep Strategic Plan in accord with canons 515 §2 and 50 *CIC*, the Reverend Tait Schroeder was mandated by the undersigned Bishop of Madison in a Decree dated 29 September 2023 (Prot. No. 127-2023) to collect and prepare information for the Presbyteral Council’s consultation; and

WHEREAS the Reverend Tait Schroeder met with the Parochial Administrator and the Parochial Vicars of the parishes of Pastorate 12 on 14 November 2023 at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish to hear their opinions about the advisability of merging the parishes into a single parish; and

WHEREAS the Parochial Administrator and Parochial Vicars were in favor of merging the four parishes into a new parish as proposed; and

WHEREAS, on the same date at the same parish church, a meeting of key representatives from various bodies (pastoral councils, finance councils, civil trustees, school families, etc.) from the parishes of Pastorate 12 was held to hear comments, concerns, and opinions pertaining to the potential merger of the parishes; and

WHEREAS the findings from these meetings were presented by the Reverend Tait Schroeder to the undersigned Bishop in consultation with the Presbyteral Council at a special session held on 14 December 2023; and

WHEREAS the Presbyteral Council, having heard the results of statistical data and the various consultations made, recommended to the undersigned Bishop of Madison, in a unanimous consultative vote, that Our Lady of the Assumption, Saint Jude, Saint Thomas the Apostle, and Saint Stephen Parishes should be merged as proposed; and

CONSIDERING the following specific reasons providing the required just cause for merging the four parishes into a new parish:

- 1) **Demographic trends and decline in attendance.** As with the majority of parishes in the Diocese, Our Lady of the Assumption, Saint Jude, Saint Thomas the Apostle, and Saint Stephen Parishes have seen decreases in the numbers of those participating in Sunday Masses and receiving the sacraments. During a previous round of pastoral planning that occurred almost twenty years ago, the combined statistics of these four parishes indicated that there were around 2,421 registered households in all the parishes. That number did not show a significant drop when looking at the combined statistics from the four parishes collected in 2021. That year, there were 2,155 registered households at the four parishes. While the parish registrations declined only slightly over the past sixteen years, Mass attendance at the four parishes has been reduced by around fifty percent in that same time period. From 2000 to 2005, the four parishes averaged around 2500 Communion per weekend. However in 2021, all four parishes averaged around 1155 Communion per weekend. While that number was affected by the Covid pandemic, it still represents a significant decline in participation at Sunday Mass for the registered Catholics in the four parishes. This decline in participation is also reflected in the other sacraments celebrated at the four parishes. The combined number of infant baptisms celebrated in 2005 was at a high of 150. The combined number for all four parishes in 2021 had declined by two-thirds to only 46 baptisms. First Communion also declined between forty and fifty percent over that same period from an average of around 125 per year from 2000 to 2005 but only 63 in 2021. These declining trends of participation occurred despite a relatively stable population in the area served by the four parishes. While the Beloit area has suffered from economic challenges, there has been a resurgence of the community in recent years. This resurgence will lead to stable population numbers over the period from 2022 to 2032. Thus, a merger of the parishes will allow for more focused efforts at evangelization with a single pastor and combined pastoral staff to reverse those trends in an area that will experience stable population numbers over the next decade;

- 2) **Insufficiency of less extreme forms of collaboration.** During the previously mentioned “Guided by the Spirit” pastoral planning conducted in 2005, this same grouping of four parishes was tasked with suggesting ways of collaborating and working together, especially given the projected declining number of priests in the Diocese of Madison. While possible mergers were suggested in that round of planning, the idea that was recommended to the Bishop at the time was that a pastoral team of two priests and one or two permanent deacons would serve all four parishes. In order to accommodate fewer priests, the members of the planning groups from each of the parishes suggested that additional staff be shared by the parishes to aid in business operations, faith formation, Hispanic ministry, and other programming directed at youth and young adults. While this model was proposed, it did not really take effect since there was no common leadership among the various parishes. It is true that the parishes did collaborate on certain apostolic endeavors, especially in terms of outreach to the poor and marginalized that also collaborated with the neighboring Diocese of Rockford, but there was no single pastor to coordinate the pastoral action and collaboration between the various parish communities. This lack of coordination shows that without a more fundamental restructuring of the parishes in Beloit and Clinton, it would be hard to stem the tide of declining participation in the sacramental life of the Church in these communities. Thus, these attempts at collaborative efforts and organizational changes over the past nineteen years were not sufficient to stem the decline mentioned above without unified vision and leadership in these four parishes that share a close geographical territory and other familial and cultural links;
- 3) **More effective outreach to young adults and Spanish speaking Catholics.** In the recent listening session held to hear people’s thoughts about a potential merger, a major area for growth was to engage more effectively with the young population in the area, especially with opportunities for outreach at Beloit College. Merging parishes will offer opportunities to consider hiring additional staff dedicated to young adult ministry and outreach. Having a greater number of young people to engage in formation events, small groups, retreats, mission trips, etc., also draws others from that age group to the Church. Another area that was highlighted already in the 2005 pastoral planning process and that was mentioned again in the current listening sessions was the need for increased outreach with Hispanic ministry in the city of Beloit. While the overall population will remain fairly stable over the next seven years, the one area of population that will increase significantly in the territory served by these parishes is the percentage of the population that speaks Spanish. There is a projected increase of about 3,000 Spanish speakers in the region by 2032, to a total of 22.5% of the overall populace. Given that many Spanish speakers are Catholics or come from a Catholic culture, additional staff supported a combined parish could more effectively reach this community. Combined financial and human resources in a merged parish will be more effective than if any one of the four individual parishes would support specialized ministers who have the requisite language and evangelical skills for this important ministry;
- 4) **Promotion and strengthening of the school and other administrative or consultative bodies.** At the time of the previous pastoral planning initiative, Beloit had two grade schools, one at Saint Jude (Brother Dutton School) and one at Our Lady of the Assumption. Unfortunately, Brother Dutton School closed at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year.

While the parochial school at Our Lady of the Assumption remains open, it has also lost some enrollment since 2005 when it had 160 students, but has 129 students in the current academic year. In order to bolster the school's enrollment and reach out to students and families that may struggle to afford tuition, the school was the first in the Diocese of Madison to enroll in Wisconsin's school choice program. While access to additional funding and providing resources for students with disabilities should both raise enrollment and help with the financial burden of the school, being able to draw upon a larger parish population could potentially increase attendance at Our Lady of the Assumption School as well. In regard to administration and other parish bodies or groups, a larger pool of parishioners to serve will also enhance the various ministries at all the churches. One of the areas that will be enhanced by the merger is making the Parish Finance and Pastoral Councils more robust by including qualified persons from the entire parish population;

- 5) **More effective distribution of clergy to achieve better pastoral care.** Merging the parishes allows for the pastor to have the parochial care of a single parish as described in canon 526 §1 *CIC*, since the Diocese of Madison is currently experiencing an insufficient number of priests fulfilling all of the requisites of canon 521 *CIC* required for being appointed as pastor. The parishes in question, even beyond their geographical proximity, have affinities and complementarities in their culture, demographics, spiritual patrimony, and other areas, such that their pastoral care could be more effectively provided within a single parish by a single pastor, assisted by one or more parochial vicars, than separately by one or more pastors who are overburdened with the care of several parishes or who perhaps fall short of the qualities that characterize a suitable pastor. Additionally, merging the parishes in question will reduce the administrative burdens on clergy and staff members that come with having four distinct parishes;
- 6) **More stable organizational structure in service of better evangelization.** Unifying these parishes will provide a stable organizational structure that will serve this area, ultimately fostering the good of souls by realigning resources for the sake of the essential mission of the Church to "go make disciples," a central theme and desire of the undersigned's episcopal ministry in the Diocese of Madison; and

OBSERVING the precepts of canons 515 §2 and 50 *CIC*, the undersigned Bishop of Madison hereby

DECREES

- 1) That Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Beloit, Saint Jude Parish in Beloit, Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Beloit, and Saint Stephen Parish in Clinton, all located in Rock County, are hereby joined by extinctive union to form Queen of Martyrs Parish, a new parish having juridic personality in accord with canons 121 and 515 §3 *CIC*; and
- 2) That all of the goods and patrimonial rights of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish, Saint Jude Parish, Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish, and Saint Stephen Parish, along with the obligations proper to each, are hereby transferred to Queen of Martyrs Parish, respecting the intention of donors and acquired rights for specific funds transferred to the new parish in accord with canon 121 *CIC*; and

- 3) That the territorial boundaries of Queen of Martyrs Parish shall be as follows:
- a. On the North: Starting at the intersection of South County Highway K and West Laird Road, then continuing east along West Laird Road to its intersection with South Luther Valley Road, then continuing north along South Luther Valley Road to its intersection with State Highway 213, then continuing east along State Highway 213 to its intersection with West Plymouth Church Road, then continuing east along West Plymouth Church Road to its intersection with South County Highway H, then continuing south along South County Highway H to its intersection with the Newark/Plymouth Township Border, then continuing due east along the Newark/Plymouth Township Border to the Beloit/Rock Township Border, then continuing due east along the Beloit/Rock Township Border to the Turtle/La Prairie Township Border, then continuing due east along the Turtle/La Prairie Township Border to its intersection with Interstate 90, then continuing north along Interstate 90 to its intersection with East Avalon Road, then continuing east along East Avalon Road to its intersection with South La Prairie Town Hall Road, then continuing north along South La Prairie Town Hall Road to its intersection with East County Highway O, then continuing east along East County Highway O to its intersection with U.S. Highway 14, then continuing east along U.S. Highway 14 to its intersection with the Rock/Walworth County Border;
 - b. On the East: Starting at the intersection of U.S. Highway 14 and the Rock/Walworth County Border, then continuing south along the Rock/Walworth County Border to its intersection with the Wisconsin/Illinois State Border;
 - c. On the South: Starting at the intersection of the Rock/Walworth County Border and the Wisconsin/Illinois State Border, then continuing west along the Wisconsin/Illinois State Border to its intersection with South Roy Road;
 - d. On the West: Starting at the intersection of the Wisconsin/Illinois State Border and South Roy Road, then continuing north along South Roy Road to its intersection with South County Highway K, then continuing north along South County Highway K to its intersection with West Laird Road; and
- 4) That the patronal feast of the parish is to be observed on the Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, which falls on September 15, when the Church recalls the suffering and spiritual martyrdom of Mary at the foot of the Cross when a sword of sorrow pierced her Immaculate Heart (cf. Luke 2:35) and should be celebrated in the churches of the parish with the rank of Feast in accord with number 52, c) of the *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar*, ranking at number 8, e) on the *Table of Liturgical Days*; and
- 5) That Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Beloit is designated as the parochial church of Queen of Martyrs Parish, while Saint Jude Church in Beloit, Saint Thomas the Apostle Church in Beloit, and Saint Stephen Church in Clinton shall serve as subsidiary churches where divine worship may take place to serve the spiritual needs of the faithful, retaining, however, the baptismal font, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, and other such rights and uses as are proper to a parish church, insofar as the law allows and the pastor sees fit; and

- 6) That provision for the office of pastor, along with instructions about his taking possession of the new parish, as well as the assignment of other clergy to serve the parish, will be effected in separate decrees; and
- 7) That, in accord with canon 535 *CIC*, the sacramental registers of the former parishes of Our Lady of the Assumption, Saint Jude, Saint Thomas the Apostle, and Saint Stephen shall be closed to any new entries and shall remain in the care and custody of Queen of Martyrs Parish to be properly preserved and safeguarded at the new main parish office. A new set of sacramental records is to be established for Queen of Martyrs Parish, and sacraments taking place in any of the churches of the parish are to be recorded in the new sacramental registers of Queen of Martyrs Parish in accord with universal and diocesan norms; and
- 8) That Queen of Martyrs Parish is to obtain its own ecclesiastical seal in accord with canon 535 §3 *CIC*; and
- 9) That a pastoral council and finance council are to be established within the new parish in accord with universal and diocesan norms as soon as possible following the effective date of this decree; and
- 10) That the Chancellor is to ensure that this decree, along with other ecclesiastical documents, information, and minutes of the Presbyteral Council concerning this extinctive union, as well as relevant documents pertaining to the civil incorporation of the new parish with the State of Wisconsin are carefully preserved in the Diocesan archive in accord with the norm of canons 486 and 491 §1 *CIC*, without prejudice to the norm of canon 535 §4 *CIC*; and
- 11) That this decree takes effect 10 May 2025, the liturgical Optional Memorial of Saint Damien de Veuster, Priest; and
- 12) That the decree is to be notified on 10 May 2025 by its publication on the Vicar General's page of the Diocesan website and by posting a print copy or copies in each of the churches of the new parish, with reference made to the decree by an announcement at Masses held at the respective churches, in the bulletins, or by other suitable means; and
- 13) That any eventual recourse against this decree can be taken in accord with the norms of canons 1734 *CIC* and following.

Given at the Chancery of the Diocese of Madison on the 6th day of May in the Year of Our Lord 2025.

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✠ Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison

Timothy J. Cavanaugh
Chancellor

