



HIS EXCELLENCY
MOST REVEREND MICHAEL W. FISHER
By the Grace of God and the Authority of the Apostolic See
BISHOP OF BUFFALO

**DECREE REDUCING THE CHURCH OF ST. STEPHEN, MIDDLEPORT AND ITS
ASSOCIATED PROPERTY TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE**

THE FACTS

Construction on the present St. Stephen church in Middleport, New York was begun in 1908. A ceremony celebrating the laying of the cornerstone was presided over by the Right Reverend Charles H. Colton, Bishop of Buffalo on 6 September of that year. On 8 August 1909 the church was dedicated by the same bishop on what is recorded as “the happiest [day] in parish history.” Now that the parish community founded in the 1870s had a permanent sacred building for worship services, the then St. Stephen’s Parish could properly serve the faithful of its geographical territory.

On 16 July 2008, the Most Reverend Edward U. Kmiec merged St. Stephen Parish with St. Mary Parish, Medina and Sacred Heart Parish, Medina to form the new Holy Trinity Parish. At that time, St. Mary church was designated as the parish church with St. Stephen church being the secondary worship site. In the same decree, the church of the Sacred Heart was designated as an oratory.

For many years, St. Stephen church served its intended purpose of providing a sacred building dedicated to divine worship for the people of Middleport. The church has known many wonderful Pastors. In September of 2022, Holy Trinity Parish was united to a cluster of neighboring parish communities to form Family #11 in the diocesan Road to Renewal.

Holy Trinity Parish has a large parish church, St. Mary, Medina, capable of accommodating the faithful from the entire future parochial territory. Due to the fact that Holy Trinity Parish foresees itself laboring under financial strains, a future prediction of a lack of priests, the coming need to contribute toward the diocesan Chapter 11 Bankruptcy settlement, and the need to better equip itself for future ministerial opportunities, it was proposed to alienate the sacred edifice and relevant property of St. Stephen church.

THE LAW

Canon 1212 remarks, “Sacred places lose their dedication or blessing if they have been destroyed in large part, or have been turned over permanently to profane use by decree of the competent ordinary or in fact.” A church can remain in relatively good structural condition and still be reduced to profane use if it is no longer needed or if it cannot be sustained by the means at the disposal of the parish who uses it.

Canon 1222 §2 states, “Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can regulate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby.” Here the necessity of a grave cause stands out as the essential motivating factor for such reduction of “a sacred building designated for divine worship to which the faithful have the right of entry” (c. 1214). Additionally, the bishop must have previously consulted both the presbyteral council and those who have a legal claim on some aspect of the church building. Following the general norm of canon 50, although not strictly speaking required by the present canon, it is also advisable to consult with those who will be affected by the closure. With this consultation in mind, as long as the good of the faithful is not seriously inconvenienced, a church building may be reduced for profane/secular use.

Regarding the grave cause required by this canon, the 2013 Instruction from the Congregation for Clergy helpfully points out that, “To assess the gravity of a cause, each must be considered individually, weighing the whole context of the situation. At times, the gravity of a cause will arise only from a combination of just causes, each insufficient in itself, but which together manifest the seriousness of the situation” (“Procedural Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes, the Closure or Relegation of Churches to Profane but not Sordid Use, and the Alienation of the Same” *Jurist* 73 [2013] 217). This Dicastery clearly establishes that a diocesan bishop is not bound to produce only one grave cause to be able to utilize canon 1222 §2, a constellation of just causes taken together are also sufficient.

Canon 1238 §2 makes clear that “Altars, whether fixed or movable, do not lose their dedication or blessing if the church or other sacred place is relegated to profane uses.” The first paragraph of this canon points the reader back to canon 1212 which discusses the loss of dedication or blessing being dependent on destruction of the sacred place or object, or its being turned over to profane use “by decree of the competent ordinary.” Thus, applying this norm to the altar(s) of a church, they must be mentioned specifically if they are to be included in the reduction of the sacred building.

THE ARGUMENT

In assessing the ongoing pastoral care of those who have traditionally attended St. Stephen church, it is necessary to point out that, from the front door of St. Stephen church, St. Mary church, Medina is only 4.9 miles away and St Patrick church of Our Lady of the Lake Parish, Barker is 12.6 miles away. While these may seem unreasonable distances for an urban environment, they are not unheard of for rural communities such as the ones in Family #11. In fact, the vast majority of the individuals who worship at St. Stephen church arrive by automobile. The distance to either of the abovementioned churches will not add more than ten minutes for those who have until now been worshipping at St. Stephen church.

On 30 August 2024, I consulted the Presbyteral Council regarding the potential reduction of the church building to profane but not sordid use. Reasons for the reduction and alienation included the need to reduce financial strain on Holy Trinity Parish, the shortage of priests available for ministry in the area, the assessment of those in charge of the Road to Renewal initiative, and a need to generate income to contribute to the diocesan Chapter 11 Bankruptcy settlement. The matter was discussed, and each member of the Council had the opportunity to vote. The Council decided nearly unanimously to support the proposition.

I further consulted the archives of the Diocese of Buffalo to see if any individual could be identified as claiming legitimate rights regarding the church or its property. The land purchased by Rev. William J. McNab in 1875 is owned by the parish corporation with no restrictions for future use. This search being completed, no individuals or heirs were identified who qualify for this consideration.

Considering the inability of Holy Trinity Parish to maintain their current quantity of worship sites and buildings going forward, in addition to the reasons cited above, I have recognized a sufficiently grave cause and decided to reduce St. Stephen church to profane but not sordid use following the norm of canon 1222 §2.

Thus, having done the requisite consultations and having gained the required consents, I, the undersigned Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher, Bishop of Buffalo, exercising my ordinary power in virtue of canons 1222 §2 do hereby decree that the church of St. Stephen, located at 21 Vernon Street, Middleport, New York 14105, be reduced to profane but not sordid use. In addition to the church building itself, I decree that all altars within the church lose their consecration, dedication, or blessing by this same decree (c. 1238).

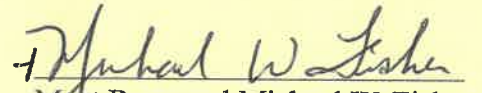
This decree is to be effective on Monday 13 January 2025.

This decree is to be communicated to the Rev. Mark J. Noonan, the Pastor of Holy Trinity Parish, Medina (c. 532) and both the churches within that territory (cf. cc. 7, 54 §1). Anyone who feels his or her rights have been legitimately harmed by this decree may present a challenge by requesting its revocation or emendation to its author within ten (10) useful days from its legitimate notification. Further recourse will follow the norms of canons 1734-1739.

Given at the Chancery of the Diocese of Buffalo on this 6th day of November 2024.




Ms. Melissa Potzler
Chancellor


Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo