

Bishop approves plan to merge Perth Amboy parishes

By Chris Donahue
Staff Writer

PERTH AMBOY — Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski has approved a restructuring plan that will merge Perth Amboy's nine parishes into four effective July 1.

The bishop announced his decision at a deanery council meeting led by dean of the Perth Amboy Deanery, Msgr. John B. Gordon, at Holy Spirit Parish Nov. 7.

The process, which took two years, was facilitated by Jeffrey Odell Korgen, executive director of the Department of Diocesan Planning. Under the plan, the following parishes will merge: La Asuncion, Our Lady of Hungary and Holy Trinity; St. Stephen, St. Mary and Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima; and Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary and Holy Spirit.

The new parishes will have to be named, but the churches in them will keep their original names and serve as worship sites, Korgen said, adding each new parish will also create its own parish council.

Bishop Bootkoski charged the councils with submitting three names for him to consider for each of the new parishes. He will announce the new names at a date to be determined. Our Lady of Fatima Parish will continue as it is because the deanery council deemed it too large to merge, Korgen said. In addition, the parish has reached the maximum staffing that priests from the Claretian community can provide.

Claretian Father Joshy T. Nirappel will remain administrator of Our Lady of Fatima Parish.

The bishop's plan also calls for the Portuguese apostolate in central Middlesex County, which has been the responsibility of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima Parish and renting space at Corpus Christi Parish, South River, to be united with the latter parish, Korgen said.

Spirit of Cooperation

Reflecting on the Renewing the Church process, Bishop Bootkoski said he was impressed with the deanery council's work, especially because of the many ethnic groups and cultures that comprise Perth Amboy's parishes. The bishop said he was aware of the unique challenges for faith communities in an urban environment because he once served as pastor of a parish in Elizabeth.

"Since I came to the Metuchen Diocese almost 10 years ago, I have always been impressed with the beauty of the city of Perth Amboy and its beautiful Catholic churches," Bishop Bootkoski said. "But what I also experienced here was a spirit of cooperation more than any part of the diocese. You gave to us an example of shared responsibility and working together and understanding each other.

"In Perth Amboy," he added, "we can't afford to support all the buildings, but I have always said the Church is not about the buildings; it is about our people. How can we be stronger? More effective? More present to our neighbors and how can we bring about the faith as best as possible to all the people of Perth Amboy?"

Preparing the Way

In the coming months, legal documents will have to be prepared for the mergers. In addition, each new parish will have to resolve issues such as shared ministries, Korgen said.

“If you have three different rosary societies, what happens to them? Do they become one rosary society? What if one of them is in Spanish, one is in Polish and one is English?” Korgen said.

Bishop Bootkoski reminded the council members that money raised from the sale of buildings will stay with the new parishes in Perth Amboy. He thanked the clergy of the nine parishes for their leadership and for gaining the trust of their parishioners and for the deanery council’s commitment.

“We did something together that had to be done and that was not easy, but we are a living example that it can be done,” Bishop Bootkoski said.

Fruits of Labor

Msgr. Gordon said that although there were some challenges, he is pleased with how members of the council worked together on a difficult task.

“Renewing the Church in Perth Amboy was a process that involved, first of all, the commitment on the part of our parish representatives and they really took that step personally. They recognized that we really needed to be a voice for something that was coming into being,” said the pastor of La Asuncion and Our Lady of Hungary parishes.

“There was a trust and sincerity that led to saying, ‘yes,’ to something that was a faith-step forward. I was very gratified to see that spirit, a sense of acknowledgement and pride of who they were and for their shared faith, for bringing about a unity.

“We may have different languages, customs and cultures, but we realize we are Catholic and that gave us this common vision.”

Deanery council member Margaret Palinkas, a parishioner at Our Lady of Hungary for 86 years, said she was baptized and married in the parish and her children were raised in it, too. Palinkas said the renewal process went smoother than she expected it to, but was not surprised because many of the parishes, including Our Lady of Hungary, already share buildings for ministries and activities with the others.

And although the name of her parish will change, Palinkas said it is comforting to know the name of the church will not. “Whatever the new [parish] name will be it will be accepted because it is part of what is going to happen,” she said.

Future Needs

Bishop Bootkoski initiated the Renewing the Church process in the diocese in 2009.

Since then, Renewing the Church projects have been completed for parishes in Carteret, South Edison, Highland Park and the diocese’s five mission or quasi-parishes. Changes in populations attending Perth Amboy’s nine parishes, economic challenges, and the projected shortage of priests available for fulltime ministry led Bishop Bootkoski to call for the restructuring of the Church there, Korgen said.

An initial phase of the process occurred April 19, 2010, when, after nine months of listening, learning, praying and discerning their common future, the nine parishes presented Bishop Bootkoski with a proposal for citywide social ministry and evangelization.

Beginning in late March, the Perth Amboy Deanery Council, with their pastors, prayerfully discussed the gifts and challenges of each parish, the past, present and future demographics of the area, and the current pastoral needs of the faithful in the deanery, Korgen said. They presented a set of recommendations to Bishop Bootkoski, which he accepted after consultation with the presbyteral council,