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## Catholic Church Closings

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## Catholic Church Closings

### Abstract

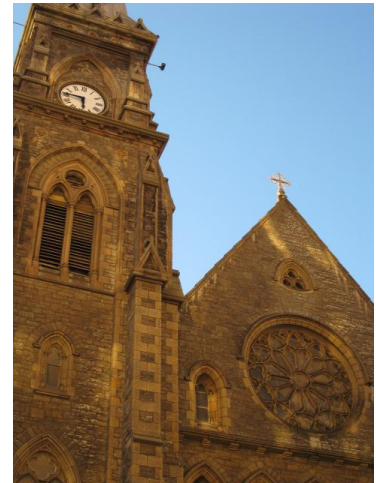
The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo was established on April 23, 1847. It serves the following counties in New York State: Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Orleans, Chautauqua, Wyoming, Cattaraugus and Allegany. The Diocese covers 6,455 square miles and has a Catholic population of 702,884. In June 2005, Bishop Edward U. Kmiec, the bishop of Buffalo, initiated a "parish-based strategic plan and spiritual revitalization initiative" called "Journey in Faith and Grace." Through this initiative, the Diocese of Buffalo "restructured" churches in the Vicariates of Southeast Buffalo, Northern Erie, and Eastern Erie. The restructuring called for 77 worship sites to be phased out, while 198 worship sites will remain in use.

### Keywords

Buffalo, Housing/Neighborhoods, Neighborhood Renewal, Data/Demographics/History, Historic Preservation, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

## **Catholic Church Closings**

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### **What makes up the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo?**

The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo was established on April 23, 1847. It serves the following counties in New York State: Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Orleans, Chautauqua, Wyoming, Cattaraugus and Allegany. The Diocese covers 6,455 square miles and has a Catholic population of 702,884.<sup>i</sup>

### **What is the “Journey in Faith and Grace”?**

In June 2005, Bishop Edward U. Kmiec, the bishop of Buffalo, initiated a “parish-based strategic plan and spiritual revitalization initiative” called “Journey in Faith and Grace.”<sup>ii</sup> Through this initiative, the Diocese of Buffalo “restructured” churches in the Vicariates of Southeast Buffalo, Northern Erie, and Eastern Erie.<sup>iii</sup> The restructuring called for 77 worship sites to be phased out, while 198 worship sites will remain in use.<sup>iv</sup>

### **In what ways may parishes be restructured?**

There are many ways to restructure parishes including:

- Single parish – May include only one priest or perhaps no priest (administration by a deacon or lay person and a non-resident priest would provide sacramental ministry).
- Two or more parishes working collaboratively sharing pastor, staff, facilities, and uniting some ministries and organizations.
- Merged parish – two or more parishes unite to form a single, larger parish, possibly using buildings at more than one site. There are two types of mergers:
  - One or more parishes merge into another parish. The receiving parish’s civil and canonical status remains unchanged, while the other parishes are canonically suppressed.
  - Two or more parishes may form a new parish with a new name. Each parish is canonically suppressed, losing its former identity, and a new parish is canonically erected.
- Oratory: a church which, as a result of a merger, no longer serves as a parish church but which could be used for weddings, funerals, or other occasional liturgical events.<sup>v</sup>

### **What were the challenges that led the Catholic Diocese to restructure?**

The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo has restructured in answer to a variety of challenges including:

- Overall decline in population throughout Western New York, including a decline in total number of Catholics and Catholic registrations. For example from 1970 to 2005, the total number of Catholics in the Diocese decreased from 950,458 to 702,884.<sup>vi</sup>;
- High number of small parishes;
- Decreasing numbers of sacraments being performed including baptisms, confirmations and marriages;
- Decreasing mass attendance;
- Decreasing numbers of priests and religious administrators disproportionate to the number of parishes in existence;
- Aging of priests – the vast majority of priests are over the age of 56; and
- Overall decline of Catholic school enrollment combined with the need to continue financing these schools, in part because of declining parishioner offerings.<sup>vii</sup>

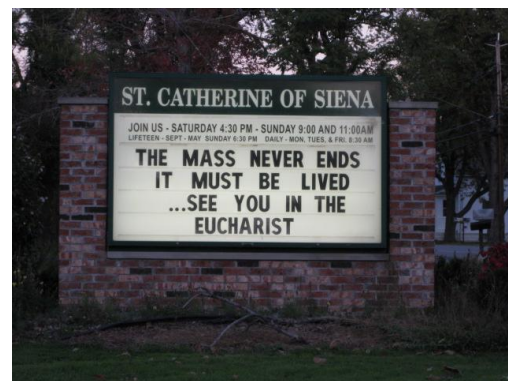
### **What role does sprawl play in the restructuring?**

In addition to the challenges listed by the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, County Legislator Thomas J. Mazur cites sprawl as a major contributor to the restructuring.<sup>viii</sup> Mr. Mazur states that while churches may have been a foundation in the past, because of sprawl, community has been abandoned, along with traditions and community structures. He looks to Europe where iconic churches have been standing for over a thousand years, in contrast to Erie County where sprawl has led to the closings of our once iconic church's less than 150 years old.<sup>ix</sup>

Mr. Mazur warns about the dangers of sprawl in relation to Catholic Church closings because he believes it makes a statement to others about our region as a whole. A region that is willing to close its community structures is not attractive to outsiders<sup>x</sup>, and will continue to negatively affect our population.

### **How many Catholic Churches have opened in suburban Buffalo in the past fifty years?**

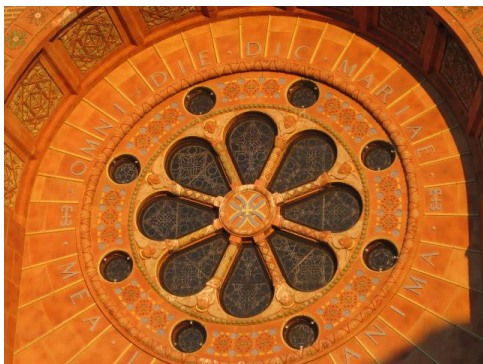
It is difficult to determine the precise effects of sprawl on the current restructuring, as it is difficult to count how many Catholic Churches have opened in Buffalo's suburbs in the last fifty years. According to *The Buffalo News*, St. Mary Church in Swormville, NY is the first new church built in the Diocese since the announcement of restructuring in 2007.<sup>xi</sup> The Catholic Diocese of Buffalo's website lists thirty two new parishes (not including Niagara County) within the past fifty years<sup>xii</sup>; however, only eleven of those are new parishes that were created before restructuring.



It seems that the other twenty one new parishes may be old parishes that merged under the restructuring and now appear on the website with a new establishment date. It is undetermined how many parishes merged to create the new church listed on the site, or if parishes that became part of a merger had been created within the last fifty years. In addition, churches that have closed and did not merge are not accounted for. Some of these parishes, like St. Catherine of Siena in West Seneca, had been created within the past fifty years.

### **What problems are created from closing a large number of churches?**

Catholic churches provide education and healthcare to the under-served including the poor and the uninsured. As Catholic churches close, so do Catholic schools that provide education not only to Catholics, but to any child in the community. In the past, these schools have been a viable alternative to public schools, offering students a solid education and opportunities that



students may not have been able to receive through public education. In addition to Catholic schools, Catholic run hospitals, continuing care, home care, diagnostic treatment centers, primary care centers and laboratory sites through the Catholic Health System<sup>xiii</sup> have been integral in serving the healthcare needs of our area. These healthcare facilities are funded through annual giving campaigns, grants and gifts.<sup>xiv</sup> Funding becomes endangered as the Catholic presence weakens in our area.

Catholic-run organizations give communities options for care and education that may be more attuned to some people's moral values than government-run facilities. Thus, they help to diversify a community.<sup>xv</sup> In addition, Catholic churches and schools have played an important role in building human capital throughout communities. They are places where bonds are made and trust is strengthened.

### **What opportunities are presented by the closing of large numbers of churches?**

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, stewardship plays an important role.<sup>xvi</sup> "Stewardship can be defined as a complete lifestyle ... of total accountability and responsibility acknowledging God as Creator and Owner of all. Stewardship is a responsible management of ... resources like time, talent, and treasure."<sup>xvii</sup>

Because of the important role of stewardship, Catholic Church restructuring can be seen as a positive step towards responsible stewardship of resources. The restructuring has also helped non-Catholic denominations, who face many of the same challenges, question their stewardship. For example, the Pastor of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church has questioned whether holding services in a church that is mostly empty is really the most efficient use of resources. Although he recognizes the emotions attached to a particular Church building, he also questions the righteousness of keeping his church open based on his religious doctrine.<sup>xviii</sup> Likewise, the restructuring of the Catholic Churches in the Buffalo Diocese may require parishioners to question whether restructuring is in line with the Catechism and if so, it may help parishioners who have lost their church heal emotionally as well as recommit to their faith, which in turn may lead to a stronger Catholic Church.

In addition to the opportunities for Catholics themselves, Catholic Church closings have helped bring the issue of sprawl and population loss into the mainstream. Average citizens can begin to understand how these issues affect them and can help our region discuss land use and community development.

## What can Buffalo do?

With so much restructuring so quickly, the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo now has many empty churches to deal with. The Diocese does have options in choosing the future of these buildings, many of them landmarks. Some of these options include:

- Reusing the empty churches for public entertainment use. A good example is Babeville, including the Ashbury Hall for concerts. This project, spearheaded by Ani DiFranco, took the old Delaware Ashbury Methodist Church, slated for demolition, and turned it into a multiuse facility for the community.
- Reusing the empty churches for offices. Again, Babeville can be used as an example of such a use. In addition, the Diocese can look to the Parish Commons on Elmwood which took an old church and converted into various medical offices and a yoga studio.
- Selling empty churches to other parishes. This idea has been called “preservation by relocation”<sup>xix</sup> and is a real possibility for St. Gerard Church on Bailey and East Delavan. A church in Atlanta has expressed interest in the building and would like to dismantle the church and rebuild it in Georgia.
- Turning empty churches into museums. One example includes The Buffalo Religious Arts Center at Xavier Hall, formerly St. Francis Xavier Church. The Hall will become a gallery for local religious art. In addition, a second site is proposed at St. Anne’s – to restore the shrine as an museum centerpiece.
- Turning the empty churches into low income housing.



Not all options will work for all churches. The church’s location and architecture play a large role in the types of reuse available. Thus far, preservation and reuse seems most successful in non-impooverished areas. Impooverished areas do not have the same power to dictate what happens to their churches and may see them being sold and dismantled. However, this option still seems more appealing than demolition. Parishioners who have lost their church may take comfort in the Diocese’s decisions if the decisions follow the Catechism. Communities may take comfort in the decisions if those decisions do not lead to further decline.

<sup>i</sup> Diocese of Buffalo. Retrieved on October 13, 2008 from <http://www.buffalodiocese.org/>.

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<sup>iv</sup> Diocese of Buffalo. Final parish restructuring announced. Retrieved on October 13, 2008 from [http://www.buffalodiocese.org/stories/final\\_parish\\_restructuring\\_announced.htm](http://www.buffalodiocese.org/stories/final_parish_restructuring_announced.htm).

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