



March 6, 2026

To the parishioners of:

Christ the King Parish, Houtzdale

St. Agnes Parish, Morrisdale

St. Basil Parish, Coalport

Including all parishioners associated with their six secondary churches

**This letter to be read at the weekend Masses of March 7-8, 2026**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I am writing to share my plan which I hope will stabilize pastoral care of the faithful living in and near the Moshannon Valley. The number of faithful attending Mass in these parishes and mission churches has significantly declined, along with the number of active priests in the diocese. While these realities may be challenging, they call us to respond with creativity and thoughtful, forward-thinking planning.

It may be helpful to share a bit of context. In the past 25 years, the number of parishioners declined 58% and the number of active priests in the diocese has declined by 49%. Registered parishioners of the parishes of Christ the King, St. Agnes and St. Basil, combined, currently total 1,851 persons, and 30% are 70 years of age or older. These realities lead me to conclude that it is no longer possible – or prudent – to provide the same level of services to nine churches in 2026 which was possible in 2000.

Together, we need to adapt to the current realities and prepare for the future. With this in mind, I am establishing your three parishes as partner parishes, all under the leadership of one Pastor, Father Johnathan Schmolt, with the assistance of a new Parochial Vicar, Father Cory Pius. They will reside in the rectory of Christ the King.

Due to the recent passing of one of our priests, I have asked Father Marc Solomon to serve as chaplain to Christ the King Manor and Penn Highlands hospital both in DuBois. These changes are effective on March 24. In addition, Deacon Gene Miller and Deacon Dennis Socash will be assigned as Deacon Assistants to all three parishes.

The three parish churches will be Christ the King, St. Agnes and St. Basil. The other churches are considered secondary churches. I have asked Father Schmolt to form a transition team to include members of the clergy and the three parishes' pastoral and finance councils. This transition team will work to establish the structure described in the *Implementation Guide for Partnered Parishes*, found on the diocesan website. This structure includes: one central office, merged staff, and coordinated Mass times. I am also asking you to continue planning for this area as numbers decline, to explore what can be done to ensure that faith continues to thrive in the Moshannon Valley.



This new structure, although unfamiliar, will have benefits to both our priests and the faithful we serve. It will reduce duplication of ministries and services, allowing our priests to better focus on pastoral care. It will also allow the parishes to redirect financial resources and volunteers to focus on the primary mission which is: *To bring the message of Jesus Christ and his Church to your children and unchurched members of the community and to invigorate your own practice of the faith.*

Father Schmolt and Father Pius will maintain the current weekend Mass schedules and all current scheduled programming until mid-April. For practical reasons, they will need to adjust the schedule for the Masses and services for Holy Week and the Triduum and will communicate these changes soon. In mid-April they will present a revised schedule which better reflects the new partnership.

I realize that this is a lot to understand and you will need time to adjust. It is my hope that you will soon appreciate the benefits and adapt to the new arrangements. I also believe that your opinions are important and I want to hear from you, which is why I have implemented a formal period for you to share your concerns or voice your support.

This feedback period begins this Monday and concludes on Friday, April 10. Please provide your feedback on the printed forms available at your parish, or use the QR code that is included at the bottom of this letter to submit electronically. Upon conclusion of this period of time, I will review the feedback with my advisors and the three-parish transition team formed by Father Schmolt. While I am committed to moving forward with this plan, no final decision has been made and your input will help us make the best decision for your community.

It is my sincere hope that every parishioner, regardless of church affiliation, will support the three-parish partnership, and be willing to adjust for the greater good of the Church in the Moshannon Valley.

I realize that your communities have experienced significant transitions of priestly leadership and parish structure in the past five years. I am grateful to all the priests who have served your pastoral needs, and ask for your prayers for Father Schmolt and Father Pius as they accompany you in faith, and work for a stable future.

I ask that you pray for vocations, and a rich outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all the faithful of our diocese.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL  
Bishop of Erie

LTP/njr

