

# Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas Recommendation

Most Rev. Michael Fisher & Rev. Bryan Zielenieski-

On July 1, 2023 I became pastor of Family #18, the Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas (RCCT). RCCT comprises of Our Lady of Czestochowa (North Tonawanda), St. Amelia (Tonawanda), St. Christopher (Tonawanda), St. Francis of Assisi (City of Tonawanda) and St. Jude the Apostle (North Tonawanda). Additionally, I have pastoral responsibilities for St. Andrew Kim Missionary Community based at Cardinal O'Hara High School. Since July of 2023, our Family of Parishes have participated faithfully in the Road to Renewal put forth by the Renewal Office of the diocese.

Our Family immediately got to work in forming the various pillar groups within the Family and by September 1, 2023 the RCCT had a Family office established and a new Mass schedule in place. All of our pillar groups have worked hard in achieving various goals set out by each group. Our Family of Parishes in less than a year's time has:

- Established a Family Office in just a month's time
- Established a new Mass schedule in just a month's time
- In year two beginning a joint Faith Formation program
  - Formed a young adult ministry team
  - Hired a Youth Minister
  - Increased digital outreach
- Began Young Adult events like "Theology on Tap"
- Participated in Life in the Eucharist
- A successful joint fundraising event to benefit the whole Family of Parishes with a Dyngus Day celebration
- Came together for strong liturgical celebrations
  - Family Thanksgiving Day Mass
  - A joint All Souls Remembrance Mass
  - A set unified Christmas Mass Schedule
  - A set unified Ash Wednesday Schedule
  - Joint Stations of the Cross for Lent
- An enriching Holy Triduum with a joint Holy Thursday and Easter Vigil celebrations
  - Potluck dinner before Holy Thursday Mass
- Simplified Mass schedule for certain civic holidays

There is more as well, but these serve as some of the highlights of the progress made within our Family of Parishes in a short amount of time. With the implementation, there have been challenges but our communities have come through stronger than where we were one year ago. While not all embrace the Family of Parishes model, our Family has done well adapting to the opportunities given with becoming a Family. With the progress over the last year, the call to merge and close parishes within our Family is extremely challenging and disappointing.

Fr. Sebastian Pierro, Fr. Rob Orłowski and Fr. Robert Agbo as Senior Parochial Vicars and Parochial Vicar, have all provided great support for me as pastor and because of their support we have been able to achieve a great deal. The retired priests that assist us in our Family have also contributed to the life of the Family and have been embraced by the various communities that they visit to celebrate the sacraments.

Additionally, in our Family we are blessed with six deacons who assist liturgically and pastorally in fulfilling the mission of the Church. The deacons provide support to the priests but also great guidance to the People of God of the RCCT as they assist on the various pillar committees as well.

Our pillar groups each have worked and are currently working on special tasks that benefit the Family as a whole, showing support for the greater good for the Church in the north towns. Our Administrative Pillar has completed its tasks and while does not formally meet any longer, members of the pillar have been invited to other Families to discuss our model and how we were able to implement some of the changes we have. Thanks to the pillar groups, the Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas, truly serve as the gold standard for the Family of Parish model and how it can work; especially for the original intention of the Renewal Office, to strengthen communities.

Truly within the spirit of what the Diocese of Buffalo had hoped for when the Family of Parishes model was rolled out, it has worked for our Family which made the recent announcement of mergers difficult. However, as we look at projections from clergy to attendance and the impact of the settlement regarding the abuse cases, it can be seen what needs to occur.

With this in mind, the below recommendation for the Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas is believed to be the best route for ensuring the Church's long-term presence and impact on the communities in which we serve.

#### *Original Recommendation*

- 1) *St. Francis of Assisi is recommended to merge with Our Lady of Czestochowa in North Tonawanda*
- 2) *Sale of St. Francis of Assisi buildings that can be, would be sold.*
- 3) *St. Andrew Kim Mission is recommended to merge with St. Leo the Great*
- 4) *St. Jude the Apostle is recommended to merge with Our Lady of Czestochowa in North Tonawanda*
- 5) *Sale of St. Jude the Apostle building/property*

#### **Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas (Family #18) Recommendation**

- 1) St. Francis of Assisi is recommended to merge with Our Lady of Czestochowa in North Tonawanda.
- 2) St. Francis' Early Childhood Center, St. Clare building and church would be sold.
- 3) St. Francis' Chapel and Columbarium would remain part of Family ministry.
  - a. Mass said on November 2 each year for All Souls Day
  - b. Those with purchased niches would be permitted to have funeral Mass in chapel
  - c. No weddings/baptisms permitted
  - d. Cemetery care remain responsibility of Family
- 4) St. Francis' rectory and church would be evaluated for possible use as the Family's outreach ministry center.

\*Outreach Ministry is a vital ministry within city of Tonawanda & immediate area
- 5) St. Jude the Apostle Parish is recommended to merge with St. Christopher
- 6) St. Jude the Apostle properties would be sold.
- 7) St. Edmund's Campus (St. Christopher Church) to be sold.
- 8) St. Amelia's land parcels to be sold.
- 9) St. Andrew Kim Mission is recommended to merge with St. Leo the Great and property sold following September 23, 2025 Feast Day celebration of St. Andrew Kim.

## **Justification for Recommendations**

- 1)** St. Francis' Chapel and Columbarium has historical significance to the city of Tonawanda. It carries great value to the people of the community
- 2)** St. Francis' Columbarium and Cemetery help to carry out the corporal act of mercy of burying the dead.
- 3)** St. Francis' rectory or church becoming the outreach ministry center for RCCT would allow for all outreach ministry to be housed from one location, bringing resources together to serve in greater capacities. St. Francis' Outreach Ministry currently serves a majority of walkers who rely upon the outreach provided. Those who benefit from St. Christopher Outreach (St. Edmund's Campus) and St. Amelia are already, a majority, commuting to receive services. This will also allow for all outreach ministry within the Family to come together under one Family umbrella to form "Matthew 25 Ministries." Additional locations are being looked at for location of outreach ministry within the city of Tonawanda with the idea that leasing a property may be more financial sound than caring for a building directly.
- 4)** Our Lady of Czestochowa is located in a more neighborhood area of North Tonawanda/Tonawanda. Its campus would allow for ministry to continue in an area that would otherwise then be stripped of any church presence. Our Lady of Czestochowa has no debt and has the highest percentage of contributing parishioners compared to registered parishioners. The campus has also recently seen recent upgrades to the campus thanks to grant projects specific for the location in which the church is located. Mergers during the Journey of Faith and Grace have occurred in area demonstrating the people's ability to transition.
- 5)** Merging St. Jude the Apostle with St. Christopher because of location of boulevard is believed to help make the transition easiest for parishioners of St. Jude's. St. Jude's is located 2.6 miles from St. Christopher.
- 6)** With the combining of outreach ministry, St. Edmund's Campus could be sold.
- 7)** St. Amelia's has acreage next to property on Eggert Road that can be sold.
- 8)** St. Andrew Kim Missionary Community is preparing to celebrate 50 years of ministry in 2025. Community leader request that their celebration be able to take place at current missionary site and then merge with St. Leo the Great following celebration. Pastoral responsibilities could transfer to St. Leo the Great pastor before, to help with transition and plan making process.

When making the above recommendation, it is important to note that the decision is driven to be a strategic move versus a decision made by finances. As of July 19, 2024 no parish in the Roman Catholic Community of the Tonawandas have any debt. Financially, three of the five parish communities have investments that are not endowment specific.

St. Amelia serves as the financial hub for the Family of Parishes and has the largest worship space available in the Family. No additional Masses will need to be added to St. Amelia's to accommodate any new parishioners from other parishes. St. Amelia School is healthy with enrollment and under the direction of new administration has great promise for growth and stability. St. Amelia's investments also allow for care for the facility to be taken care of with little strain on the community as well as support for the school. St. Amelia's is located 2.6 miles from St. Francis Church and 3.4 miles from St. Christopher Church.

St. Christopher is centrally located on Niagara Falls Blvd. to all parishes within the Family. St. Christopher's has seen an increase in parishioner registration and Mass attendance over the course of the last year and the school's enrollment is up over 70 students compared to the number of students enrolled at the end of the 2023-2024 school year (up over 100 students if including that the graduating class has been replaced fully). St. Christopher's is located 3.7 miles from St. Jude the Apostle and 3.5 miles from St. Francis of Assisi.

It is vital to the identity of both St. Amelia and St. Christopher schools that the churches remain open to help feed the students spiritually as part of their Catholic education.

Our Lady of Czestochowa is located in the city of North Tonawanda. By keeping OLC open as an active community it provides an important ministry of presence to a community that would otherwise be isolated from the faith because of the barrier created by Route 425 (Twin Cities Highway). Strategically, OLC will serve as a location that serves those located within the cities of Tonawanda and North Tonawanda. The architectural character of the church provides an atmosphere that the other churches in the Family cannot. Our Lady of Czestochowa is located 1.8 miles from St. Francis of Assisi and 3.0 miles from St. Jude the Apostle.

A new Mass schedule will need to be created to accommodate weekend Mass attendance.

It would be the plan that any mergers would not take place until after January 1, 2025.

Finally, with the reorganization within the Family of Parishes we also recognized how fortunate we are as a Family to have four priests assigned in active ministry along with six deacons. Our deacons have been invited to discern their role in ministry in the Family when we are reduced from five to three churches.

While in 2030 our Family is projected to have three priests, it is believed that two priests can serve within the structure of three parish communities, with sacramental assistance from retired clergy, or clergy with special assignments. It is understood that with the reduction in parishes we will see a reduction in active priests assigned to our Family. We will continue to reach out to retired priests in our diocese who live within our Family's borders for their assistance in serving the sacramental needs of the People of God. To be clear, it is our desire to have three priests assigned to our Family, but two priests could manage the sacramental needs.

I look forward to sitting down to discuss our Family's recommendation with you, be assured of our Family's prayers during this challenging time of change in our diocese.

In Good Faith,  
Rev. Michael P. LaMarca  
*Pastor*