

you can imagine, and at the risk of sounding a bit dramatic, this affects everything.

It affects Mass times, locations, administration, parish membership, use of buildings and more. It affects things so much that I felt it necessary to create a visioning plan which would move us through the process decisively and in no longer than 15 months (April 2026 – June 2027). This process will require parish 'transition teams', helping us to make long term funding projections, envision the ways our church buildings can be used, updating plans for maintenance of buildings and grounds, and more.

This is no small task before us but, with the plan I shall be presenting to the Finance Councils this week, I am confident that the path forward will be clear and (as much as possible) compassionate.

My chief concern throughout these changes will be care of souls. A careful and complete transition into this new arrangement is important to me because you are important to me. These changes affect all of us, not least of all you who have called your parish home for decades and (for your families) even generations.

What brings me some measure of clarity and calm in this process is remembering that the closing of churches, although it is always painful, is not new to the life of the Church.

In October of 2025 I visited the ancestral home of the Bechtold family in Bilfingen, Germany, where even that church is expected to close.

And the former monastery which supported that town for centuries, closed almost centuries ago, now stands as an archaeological site; a structural vestige of its former self. Even during my first day on the Camino de Santiago I walked by a church building where all that remained were the stony walls.

I present these images not to frighten but to remind us that throughout the life of the Church churches will close and churches will open. The Catholic Church and School of Saint John Vianney, in Goodyear, AZ, is a very good example of this.

When it was founded in 1956, its congregation size was small, measuring only in the hundreds. Then the Church came under the direction of the Congregation of the Holy Cross priests (and, for a time, then Fr. Patrick Neary) and the number of parishioners blossomed from hundreds to thousands. I believe the number of parishioners is now well over 5,000! St. John Vianney Parish evolved from a mission-style gathering of farm families into a large suburban parish serving the now fast-growing West Valley of Phoenix, AZ.

The Diocese of Saint Cloud, because it serves a predominantly rural region of Minnesota, is currently facing a recession of Catholic faithful. It is a recession largely reflective of the urbanization we have seen throughout the last century in Minnesota where the population of 70% rural and 30% urban has almost entirely reversed (30/70). These mergers, and this restructuring, is responding to demographic shifts much like the Church of Saint John Vianney in Goodyear, AZ

## FATHER MITCHELL'S PASTORAL BULLETIN

*Sunday, March 8, 2026*

To the parishioners of Saint Andrew's, Greenwald,  
Saint John the Baptist's, Meire Grove, Saint Mary's, Melrose &  
Saint Michael's, Spring Hill, of the One In Faith Area Catholic Community

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has responded to their change by adding buildings to their campus and even expanding the church building.

And we should not fail to recognize the many good things happening in our parishes. This year alone we will have welcomed at least 8 people into full communion in the Catholic Church. We continue to bring communities together with our meals and fundraisers. We now have adoration with confessions each Saturday at Saint Mary's. The homebound are visited regularly. This weekend we hosted a retreat for the Latino community. You can now call the office to sign up for a parish trip to visit the Saint Paul Seminary and meet some of our seminarians on Saturday, April 11 (cost \$40 per person – food and coach bus). Our One in Faith ACC area Catholic schools educate 1/3 of all I.S.D. 740 students, grades K-5, and the list goes on. I guess what I am saying is that there is reason for great rejoicing even during this time of dramatic change.

I repeat my appeal: Please pray for the process and for one another. May the Holy Spirit guide us in the days ahead and only help to strengthen our love for Christ in the Eucharist.

Mother Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

In Christ,

**Father Mitchell Bechtold**

Greetings.

This week, I am convening a meeting of the finance councils of the parishes of Saint Michael, Saint Andrew, Saint John the Baptist and Saint Mary. At this meeting I will be presenting a parish merger framework intended to guide us through June of 2027. This plan is multi-faceted, comprehensive and concise. It is intended to provide a clear vision for the future, determine ways each of our buildings can be of future use, for how much longer, at what cost, and more. I intend to make the final version of this plan available online at [oneinfaith.org](http://oneinfaith.org) no later than Sunday, March 15.

Why am I presenting this framework, this process, now? Because we all have questions about what comes next. It has been said about this merger, and is true, that nothing is final until it is final. That said, if the word we received from the Diocese is ratified then, beginning around July 2026, our four parishes will be merged into one and Sunday Masses would only be celebrated at the church campuses of Saint Mary in Melrose and Saint John the Baptist in Meire Grove. As