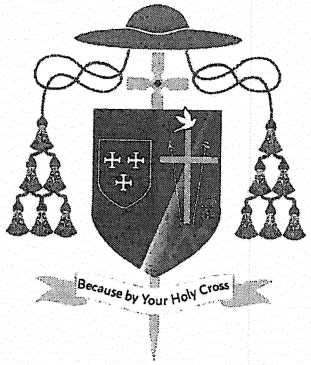
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Bruce Alan Lewandowski, C.Ss.R.
By the Grace of God and Favor of the Apostolic See
Bishop of Providence

DECREE

IN THE NAME OF GOD. AMEN.

WHEREAS, the immediate consequences of the Second World War were many in the United States – especially when gas rationing limited travel options for many Americans, including residents of Rhode Island. At that time, many Catholic residents found it difficult to afford gas so that they could drive to Immaculate Conception Parish, Westerly, for Sunday Mass. Under the leadership of a small group of laypersons in Ashaway and Potter Hill, a petition was submitted by those who wanted Holy Mass there.

Father James McKenna, the pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish, Westerly, agreed to send a priest if a place could be provided for Mass. The Marist Fathers of Westerly already were sending priests to the missions of Bradford, Carolina, and Watch Hill. The Circle Hall at Potter Hill (now a private residence) was rented for Holy Mass for $250 per year.

Father Joseph Demers celebrated the First Mass in Ashaway in Circle Hall on December 8, 1943, in the presence of 16 people. The mission was officially established as a parish on September 19, 1946 by Most Reverend Francis Keough. Bishop Keough named Father Raymond Crawford the first pastor of Our Lady of Victory Parish (named in part as gratitude to our Blessed Mother

for the victory in the Great War that played a role in the parish's establishment). Father Crawford celebrated the First Mass of the new parish in Circle Hall on September 29, 1946.

WHEREAS, the first parish Religious Instruction classes for children were conducted in October 1946 by Father Crawford and two Sisters of Mercy from Immaculate Conception Convent in Westerly.

WHEREAS, in November 1947, the Circle Hall was sold and was no longer available for Mass. The Ashaway Volunteer Fire Station was then rented for $240 per year and the first Masses were celebrated there on December 7, 1947. Sunday and Holyday Masses were offered there until a new church could be built.

WHEREAS, on October 9, 1949, a new church was dedicated by Most Reverend Russell McVinney, with the First Mass celebrated immediately following by Father Crawford. The church was renovated fittingly after the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council. For many years, the parish hosted its Annual Summer Festival, and was a popular attraction for all in the area of Ashaway, and a source of revenue and fellowship.

WHEREAS, Our Lady of Victory Parish has experienced a decline in activity within these last decades or so, including a decrease in sacramental practice and Mass attendance.

WHEREAS, more recently, in 2015, the parish reported 10 baptisms, 17 first communions, 11 confirmations, and 2 marriages (an average approximate total of 170 persons attended the weekend Masses). In 2024, the parish reported 0 baptisms, 3 first communions, 5 confirmations, and 0 marriages (an average approximate total of 90 persons attended the weekend Masses). Our Lady of Victory Parish has only one Sunday Mass; and since July 2026, it has averaged an approximate total of 71 people. Registered parishioners at OLV totalled approximately 154 individuals, as of May 2026.

WHEREAS, conversely, neighboring St. Joseph Parish has experienced slightly more steadiness in sacramental practice and Mass attendance. In 2015, the parish reported 9 baptisms, 9 first

communions, 11 confirmations, and 5 marriages (an average approximate total of 277 persons attended the weekend Masses). In 2024, the parish reported 2 baptisms, 4 first communions, 4 confirmations, and 0 marriages (an average approximate total of 190 persons attended the weekend Masses). There is one Sunday vigil Mass and one Sunday Mass at St. Joseph; and since July 2026, these have averaged an approximate total of 182 people. Registered parishioners at St. Joseph totalled approximately 318 individuals, as of May 2026.

Neighboring St. Vincent de Paul Parish (for which Father Francese is also responsible) has only a Sunday vigil Mass; and since July 2026, it has averaged an approximate total of 137 people.

WHEREAS, since 2019, the Our Lady of Victory and St. Joseph communities have shared a pastor and a common bookkeeper, secretary, and religious education director. Father Francesco Francese was appointed in July 2024 to serve both parishes. In July 2026, Father Francese also assumed the pastoral care of St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Bradford. Thus, due to the shortage of priests available for parish assignments, currently all three parishes share one parish priest.

WHEREAS, in February 2026, Father Francese approached Father Michael Najim, diocesan Vicar for Priests, to discuss the possibility of a canonical merger, involving Our Lady of Victory and St. Joseph.

WHEREAS, on May 4, 2026, Father Michael Najim, Vicar for Priests, and Mr. Michael Lavigne, Secretary for Evangelization and Pastoral Planning, met with Father Francese, and the trustees, finance councils, and lay leaders of Our Lady of Victory and St. Joseph parishes to discuss a canonical merger.

WHEREAS, Father Francese and the leadership of both parishes wrote to Bishop Lewandowski in a letter dated May 29, 2026, in which a formal request is made for a canonical merger, with Our Lady of Victory Parish merging into St. Joseph Parish. In that letter, Father Francese notes that, "St. Joseph does have more people and programs, and its financials are in much better condition but it is not several times larger than Our Lady of Victory. This request is more about the size of

OLV and its location and solidifying the pastoral relationship that has been established since 2019."

WHEREAS, on September 15, 2026, Mr. Michael Lavigne met with Father Francese, and the trustees, finance council, and lay leaders of Our Lady of Victory Parish to discuss the next steps in the process of a canonical merger.

WHEREAS, on October 6, 2026, the Most Reverend Bruce A. Lewandowski convened the Council of Priests, proposed the canonical merger, and received their affirmative consultation in accord with can. 515 §2.

IN IURE

The parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular Church (cf. can. 515 §1 CIC). Every legitimately erected parish enjoys juridic personality by the law itself and is entrusted to a pastor as its proper shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop (cf. can. 515 §§1, 3 CIC). The diocesan bishop alone is competent to erect, suppress, or alter parishes; but to do so, he must hear the presbyteral council and receive their counsel (cf. can. 127 §1; 515 §2 CIC). In keeping with the norms on individual administrative acts, before issuing an individual decree, an authority should seek out the necessary information and proofs and hear those whose rights can be injured, insofar as possible (cf. can. 50 CIC).

The law foresees four types of modifications of parishes, including suppression, extinctive union (whereby one parish is absorbed by another), extinctive union (whereby two parishes unite to form a new juridic person), and division (cf. canons 121-123 CIC). Whereas territorial parishes are united or divided, personal parishes may be suppressed, although they are ordinarily united or divided, either in connection to another personal parish or even to a territorial parish (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, Procedural Guidelines, Prot. N. 2013 2013 1348, n.1d). In the case

of an extinctive union, the assets and liabilities of the former parish are absorbed by the receiving parish or the newly erected parish, *mutatis mutandis*.

The law requires at least a just cause to notably alter a parish. According to the praxis of the Dicastery for the Clergy and the jurisprudence of the Apostolic Signatura, the principal motivation for modifying a parish is the concern for souls (*Christus Dominus*, no. 32) and the modification should be undertaken when the good of the faithful requires it (*Apostolorum Successores*, no. 214). Although the just cause must be *ad rem*, the diocesan bishop can – and sometimes should – consider the good of the whole diocese (cf. Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, Decree Prot. N. 45082/11 CA, 27 April 2011; Congregation for the Clergy, Procedural Guidelines, Prot. N. 2013 2013 1348, n.1h).

Jurisprudence acknowledges that a paucity of clergy, a declining participation in parish life, or financial difficulties of the parish in question all meet the standard of a just cause for the extinctive union of a parish (cf. SSAT, def. sent. 21 May 2011, Prot. No. 42278/09 CA; Congregation for the Clergy, Procedural Guidelines, Prot. N. 2013 2013 1348, n.2f, h).

IN FACTO

Over the past several years, demographic shifts in Washington County have necessitated renewed pastoral planning in keeping with the original mission for which Our Lady of Victory Parish was established. In many ways, the factors that influenced its birth are long gone.

THEREFORE

With the objective of strengthening the Catholic presence in this section of Southern Rhode Island; aware of their geographic proximity; having consulted the Council of Priests in accord with Canon 515, §2; and weighing before God the good of souls and their pastoral care; and given the just causes presented above, I hereby

DECREE

That the Parish of Our Lady of Victory, a territorial parish established in Ashaway, shall merge into St. Joseph Parish, Hope Valley, a territorial parish, in a *unio extinctiva* (can. 121). St. Joseph Parish shall receive all parishioners, assets and liabilities of Our Lady of Victory Parish (can. 121 CIC).

The Our Lady of Victory church building will remain available as an additional worship site of St. Joseph Parish

All parish registers containing the records of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Marriage, and deaths of Our Lady of Victory Parish will be stored at St. Joseph Parish where they will be faithfully maintained in accord with canon 535 CIC.

St. Joseph Parish, in receiving the parish territory of Our Lady of Victory, will now be bounded:

Starting at the junction of Clarks Falls Road and Route 3, South along Tomaquag Brook to the Pawcatuck River.
West along the Pawcatuck River to the junction of Nooseneck Hill Road and Hiscox Road,
Northwest along and including both sides of Hiscox Road to the junction of Potter Hill Road.
North by an airline from that point to the Rhode Island/Connecticut state line. Move north along the state line to the West Greenwich/Coventry town line.
East along the town line to Route 102 (Victory Highway)
South along and including both sides of Route 102 (Victory Highway, becomes Ten Rod Road) to junction with Tripps Corner Road.
South along, but not including Tripps Corner Road, to junction with Hog House Hill Road
North along, and including Hog House Hill Road, to point east of Old Mountain Road
East by airline to Hillsdale Road
South along, and including both sides of Hillsdale Road, to junction with James Trail
Southeast by airline to the junction of Kingston Road and Heaton Orchard Road

West along, and including both sides of Kingston Road to junction with Route 112 (Richmond Townhouse Road)

Southwest by airline to the junction of Wood River and Woodville Road

West along, and including both sides of Woodville Road to the starting point.

FURTHERMORE

I hereby direct Rev. Francesco Francese, Pastor of St. Joseph Parish and Administrator of Our Lady of Victory Parish, to inform the parishioners of both parishes at all the Masses on the weekend of October 31 – November 1, 2026.

This decree will become effective at that time.

Our Lady of Victory and St. Joseph parishioners who wish to make recourse against this decree have the right to do so. Any *remonstratio* must be submitted in writing to the Bishop of Providence within the peremptory time limits of ten (10) useful (business) days of the above notification dates (October 31 – November 1, 2026) of this decree, in accord with can. 1734 §2.

Given in Providence, at the Chancery, on, the 9th day of October in the year of Our Lord 2026.

Most Rev. Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R.
Bishop of Providence

Rev. Timothy Reilly
Chancellor

