

Forest of Dean Churches Merger

What this means for us

Thank you all for coming today.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Pip Deave, and I'm chair of the Parish Pastoral Council or PPC.

Bishop Bosco has agreed for us to merge our two parishes.

Possibly some of you may be surprised to hear that we are still two parishes, since we have been operating as one for several years, with one priest, one administrator, one parish hall and one PPC, but we are still officially the parish of Our Lady of Victories, Cinderford, and the parish of St Margaret Mary in Coleford.

So what does merging the parishes mean to us?

It means that we can fully function as one group of Catholics in the Forest of Dean with shared resources and finances and a shared vision for the future.

It also means we can reconsider our needs as a community, both now, and for the next generation and beyond.

Why is this happening now?

The PPC has been wanting to do this for some time.

Between June and September 2021 we carried out a survey of all parishioners, which was called ***"Inspired!"***

The results, circulated afterwards, highlighted a strong desire to gather together as a people and to reduce the number of church buildings. This wish was consolidated at the AGM of the PPC in November 2021 when there was a unanimous vote to investigate moving towards one church building for the Forest.

To clarify:

The parish of St Margaret Mary in Coleford benefits from the church building on High Nash with an attached presbytery (where Fr Martin now lives), separate church hall and car park all on the same site. There was a secondary Mass Centre, The Sacred Heart in Sedbury, which was closed in 2018 and subsequently sold.

The parish of Our Lady of Victories in Cinderford encompasses the church on Flaxley St. and the secondary Mass centre of the church of St Joseph in Lydney.

As most of you know, we have had changes in Parish Priests in recent years and a prolonged period with no priest. During this time we were unable to move forward. Of course, it would have been preferable to follow the *Inspired* consultations straight away.

Now we have Fr Martin settled into his role as our Parish Priest and, with his authority and the support from the diocese we are able to proceed. Fr Martin is also Parish Priest of Newent, required to serve all three parishes.

Following a meeting with Bishop Declan in 2023 it was decided to trial different Mass times in our churches to see how it affected the congregation sizes. Prior to this, Lydney and Coleford alternated a Saturday evening Mass, and Cinderford and Newent each enjoyed a regular Sunday morning Mass.

The new trial arrangement was made possible by priests from St Peter's in Gloucester serving Newent to allow Lydney to have a regular Sunday Mass at 11am. Coleford trialled a 9am Sunday time and Cinderford the Saturday evening vigil.

The trial, scheduled for six months, but running considerably longer due to losing our Parish Priest, resulted in a small increase in attendance in Coleford, a decrease in Cinderford and a dramatic increase in congregation in Lydney; and it continues to grow, helped by the influx of families moving into new houses in the area.

We have been very fortunate that the assistance from Gloucester has continued throughout our priest-less time but it will cease in the summer.

What will happen when the Parishes merge?

The Bishop and the Diocesan Curia, including Property Services and the Chancellor, are fully supportive and on-board with our plans. The Chancellor will produce documents to officially merge the parishes.

Sadly, one church will need to close to allow regular services in the others. Coleford provides the priest's home, parish office and hall. Lydney is the newest church building and is surrounded by lots of space with potential to enlarge and upgrade existing facilities.

The church that will close is Our Lady of Victories in Cinderford.

Whilst it is always sad and distressing to close any church that has been at the heart of a community for so many years, we feel that there is no alternative if we are to survive and indeed *flourish* as a community in the future.

However, I would like to point out that, having explored many options for a one-church parish - we have looked at new-build, redundant buildings and central sites and shared buildings too - we are lucky that we are able to keep two sites!

Why Cinderford?

The building requires extensive work just to keep it safe for use.

Our Lady of Victories was built in a very short time, (14 weeks!) before the Second World War, opened in 1939 and was run by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) until 2006, when they pulled out and asked Clifton Diocese to take it on. Against their better judgement, and responding to local opposition, the Diocese agreed to do so, selling the presbytery in 2012 and using the money to replace the church roof and update toilet and kitchen facilities. The Quinquennial Inspection of April 2023 by Jonah Jay Architects Ltd identified 48 principal defects requiring attention. Continuing damp through inadequate single thickness walls (despite treatment), asbestos in the under-croft and boiler room, and rotten wood to stairs up to the unsafe choir balcony have resulted in an estimate for remedial work by a firm of Building and Project Consultants engaged by Property Services of approximately £200,000 excluding VAT.

Parking

There is no dedicated parking at the church with regular complaints from neighbouring residents about inconsiderate street parking by people needing close access to the church for services.

Congregations

The current weekend congregation is as low as 12-20, and weekday mass around 8 people.

The next thing you may ask is:

How will this affect each of us?

What is most important is that the people of Cinderford are supported in this difficult time, both spiritually and practically. Losing a place of worship with so many memories of pivotal life events is never going to be easy.

A taxi service to one of the other churches for a Sunday mass will be arranged and paid for anyone who does not have their own transport and needs help in this way.

It is hoped that a weekday mass on a Friday will continue to be celebrated in Cinderford at another venue after OLV closes.

There will be some changes in Mass times across all the churches in the Forest and Newent to allow Fr Martin to serve all the churches every week at regular times. These are yet to be fully confirmed and involve discussion with the Newent Parish.

St Joseph's church in Lydney will be extended and updated to make it fit for purpose for the future and environmentally sound.

What are the positives in all this?

1. Our parish finances are currently OK.

Our Fabric and Finance committee have done a great job looking after our finances. Income from Mass collections is moderate overall, with many parishioners paying by standing order and adding gift aid. We are just about breaking even. Only just! We have money from the sale

of the Sacred Heart Chapel in Sedbury to spend on building requirements at Coleford and Lydney.

2. Stronger together than the sum of our parts

With an overall number of 249 registered practising Catholics in the Forest we should be able to gather together to worship and widen our mission and outreach. This is not about buildings but about *community*.

Our current Mass attendances are in the region of 30-50 in Coleford, 60-100 in Lydney, and 12-25 in Cinderford.

Joining together pools our resources, our musicians, readers, welcomers, children's liturgy leaders, Eucharistic Ministers and other volunteers. Enthusiasm is contagious!

3. It will be more economical to run our buildings and more environmentally friendly.

How can we justify maintaining and heating so many buildings in these days of high costs and global warming and acute awareness of our carbon footprint? Our late Pope Francis was very particular about our awareness of our impact on the environment.

4. We should be able to upgrade and make full use of our existing buildings, particularly St Joseph's to make it fully fit for purpose and something we are collectively proud of. Keeping any building that is expensive to run and only used for a couple of hours a week does not make sense no matter how much it pulls our heart-strings!

5. A thriving community attracts new members

Regular services are less confusing and provide a basis for habit-making and regular church attendance.

St Joseph's in Lydney sits in a prominent position in the town, enhancing its visibility can only benefit the profile of our Forest Catholic community!

So what is the time-line for these changes?

The merger will occur as soon as the Chancellor has drawn up the documents, within a few weeks.

The church of Our Lady of Victories will cease weekend Masses, the last Saturday evening Mass being July the 26th.

Weekday masses could continue until the church is closed after a service of thanksgiving with Bishop Bosco celebrating Mass at a date to be confirmed at the end of the summer.

Thank you all for listening. This has not been an easy thing to do. We appreciate your understanding.

I would also like to thank all the members of the PPC (who represent our parishioners from each church) for their continued support and hard work.

We are here to answer any questions you may have.

Pip Deave
Chair, PPC FOD Catholic Churches