

The Parish of Saints James & Patrick

St. James Church

742 E. Clay Street
Decatur, IL 62521
(217) 428-7733
James Rossi
rossij@saintsjamesandpatrick.org

St. Patrick Church

407 E. Eldorado Street
Decatur, IL 62521
(217) 429-5363
Therese Allen
allent@saintsjamesandpatrick.org

The Parish of Saints James and St. Patrick Announce Merger

The two oldest parishes in Decatur have announced a merger. St. James and St. Patrick Catholic Churches will conduct a Mass on July 1st to celebrate the joining of the two parishes.

St. Patrick was founded in July 1853. Father Michael Pendergast, Decatur's first missionary priest, began celebrating Mass twice a month in a residence on West Main Street. Decatur's first Catholic Church was established in response to the growing number of Irish Catholics who worked on the construction of the Great Western Railroad. In 1857, construction began on a permanent church on West Prairie Street on land purchased for \$1. In 1863 the first brick church was dedicated at the corner of Jackson and North streets. This building was later renovated to serve as the parochial school. The present church was completed in 1910 and has undergone many renovations since its construction. St. Patrick Church currently serves as the parish home for over 1000 families.

St. James' first church building was resurrected in 1877 under the guidance of Rev. Joseph Spaeth. He was sent to Decatur as a newly ordained priest to establish a church for the 16 German families requesting it. In addition to building a new church, and starting a new school, Father Spaeth was also significant in the establishment of then-neighborhood St. Mary's Hospital. In 1911, construction began for a new church building to accommodate the more than 125 families. George P. Stauduhar, a Rock Island architect, designed a German gothic structure for St. James. He specialized in Catholic Church construction, including the new St. Patrick's Church in Decatur. Upon completion, St. James was dedicated on June 23, 1912. Although undergoing several renovations throughout the years, the fourteen Stations of the Cross in the church today are from the original church built in 1877. The church is graced with numerous beautiful stained glass windows and the centerpiece remains a glorious 34-foot high altar, hand-carved from basswood, designed especially for St. James as a gift from the Knights of Columbus.

On September 16, 2006, Father Jeff Grant became pastor at St. James in addition to remaining pastor of St. Patrick. Sister Glenda Bourgeois, who had shepherded St. James Parish for several years, completed her service as Parish Life Coordinator.

In asking Father Jeff, why the merger of the two churches now, he responded, "The merger between St. Patrick and St. James Parishes was needed for several reasons.

First of all, there are a declining number of priests to offer Mass and provide for the other liturgical and sacramental needs of the parish. For example, the number of priests working in our diocese is less than half what it was forty years ago.

Secondly, the demographics of our parishes have changed. With growth to the north and south, the center section of town has become older (and thus, less children) than it was a generation ago.

Thirdly, St. James and St. Patrick Parishes are only seven blocks apart. Both parishes have always served the same territory. Originally, St. James was established to assist the German Catholic population that settled in Decatur. The early pastors spoke, understood, and even preached in German. The needs of our parishioners today are different. We must focus now on how to best serve the people who make up our parish and community. Thus, with limited resources, it only makes sense to use them wisely in order to reach out to the people and bring the message of Christ to all," Father Jeff concluded.

The process of working toward a merger proceeded with the naming of a parish merger steering committee made up of individuals from both parishes. Both churches Parish Councils began meeting as one group and held town meetings early in the year for people of both churches to meet and discuss their ideas and hopes for the newly formed parish. These meetings proved to be very successful, but what was the response from the people of both churches? When asking Father Jeff this question, he stated, "The initial reaction for many was shock and then sadness. A parish holds a special place in your heart. Besides Sunday Mass, it is the place where our people have gathered for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Many have been educated in our schools. There is much emotion tied to each parish. Yet, the church is about more than this and I think now the feeling is one of anticipation. What will this merged parish be like? How can we work together to serve Christ in others? We are not closing parishes but merging them. We are joining together to be able to accomplish more. To me, it is an exciting time. "

The progression of the merger has proceeded prayerfully and thoroughly until now. The individual parishes of St. Patrick and St. James will be merged into one larger parish officially voted on by both parishes to be named The Parish of Saints James and Patrick. After July 1st, both parishes will cease to exist individually but both worship sites of St. James and St. Patrick Church will continue to be used for services. The names of the church buildings will not change, but the administration of both sites will belong to the newly named parish.

To celebrate the newly formed parish, mass will be held at both St. James and St. Patrick. Mass will begin at 9am at St. Patrick and end at St. James. It will be one complete Mass celebrated at two worship sites. Arrangements have been made for those who cannot walk between churches, and shuttles will be running between the churches to get people to and from their cars. An open house at both worship sites will follow the Mass with all facilities on display. Refreshments will also be available at both locations.

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