



## THE DIOCESE OF STEUBENVILLE

### OFFICE OF THE APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATOR

February 7, 2025

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In this Holy Year, I greet you in the name of the Lord Jesus, in whom we place our hope, a hope which does not disappoint.

Since I began my term as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Steubenville on June 14, 2024, I have worked extensively with the diocesan consultors, members of the diocesan finance council, diocesan administrators, and the priests of the diocese to complete what is essentially a self-study of the state of the diocese. The diocesan consultors and I now present this summary of that self-study. We hope that this information will shed some light on the reality of our present situation.

#### **OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY:**

Overall finding: The most significant issue facing the Diocese of Steubenville in the next 5 to 10 years, and indeed in the next 30 years, is the projected decrease in population. The general population has declined noticeably, and the Catholic population even more so, with no reversal of this trend in sight. This reality is troubling and the challenge it will present to the future viability of the diocese will be significant. The presence of Franciscan University and numerous apostolates have helped somewhat to soften this decline, but they are not able to prevent it. Therefore, in our opinion, a significant question to ask considering possible paths forward is: *When does a diocese simply become too small?*

#### **I. SOME BACKGROUND CONTRIBUTING TO THE PRESENT SITUATION.**

The 13 counties of the Diocese of Steubenville are the spiritual home of more than 29,000 Catholics comprising 6% of general population. The diocese's recent difficulties have their origin partly in the establishment of the diocese in 1944. When it was established on October 21, 1944, the diocese was widely acknowledged to be a missionary diocese. The result is twofold: the diocese continues to operate with less-than-ideal and occasionally inadequate resources, but at the same time a vibrant missionary spirit remains present in the diocese.

More recently, the financial scandal which became public in 2018 and the fact that the cathedral has fallen into dilapidation have negatively affected public confidence in diocesan leadership. On a positive note, following the discovery of the fiscal mismanagement, financial reforms were put in place in 2018 and 2019, and staffing and program cuts were implemented to increase efficiency and bring expenses in line with the budget. With the financial reforms in place and a return to some normalcy, the Diocese of Steubenville is on a stronger financial footing than in the recent past.

## II. PASTORAL OBSERVATIONS.

It must be said at the start that good things have happened and are still happening in the Diocese of Steubenville. With that as background, I and the Consultors offer the following observations:

### A. The Faithful.

The faithful of the diocese identify strongly with the Catholic Church and with their parish, but less so with the diocese. For the most part, they continue to attend Mass, contribute financially, and support their parishes.

The entire Diocese of Steubenville lies within the region of Appalachia. Typical of that region, decades of economic decline have taken their toll on the population. In many places, there is a general sense of having been abandoned by structures and institutions which once supported a robust community. Watching the decline of once vibrant communities over the course of decades has been difficult for many. The prospect of the diocese itself being merged into another is seen by some as one more institution now abandoning them as well.

There are exceptions to this general disposition, most notably in the City of Steubenville and the surrounding area where the presence of Franciscan University draws significant numbers of young, dedicated Catholics. There are other such pockets as well, but they are less notable than in the Steubenville area properly speaking.

### B. The Clergy.

The clergy are very loyal to the diocese. From young to old, they share an awareness of the missionary nature of the diocese, which for them is a source of pastoral zeal. Frustrated by a general sense of having been “spinning their wheels” pastorally for the past several decades, they express a willingness to do the hard work needed to build the Kingdom if they are given a chance, but they acknowledge that they cannot do this without a bishop who will lead them.

### C. The Process.

The more than two years since the announcement of the proposed merger have been hard on both faithful and clergy alike. Many people believed from the announcement of a proposed merger that it had already been decided, even though in truth no decision had actually been made.

The faithful and clergy have been in limbo waiting for the merger to take place. The mistrust that arose from the financial mismanagement has contributed to a mistrust of this process, which some see as not only as lacking in transparency but even as disingenuous. The sudden replacement of the Apostolic Administrator in June of 2024 exacerbated the situation.

The priests respect the authority of the Church to alter the structure of the diocese if that needs to happen, but they are desirous for the chance to offer their input.

### III. FINANCES.

#### A. Overall Finances.

A report issued in June of 2023 on the financial health of the diocese foresaw a negative cash flow within 5 years without any prospect of reversing the trend. The report included a caveat that leadership decisions and other factors could alter the financial forecast.

It appears that the caveat was well-placed. Cost-cutting efforts to bring the budget into balance, the end of the pandemic, market performance, and management reforms have resulted in the financial state of the diocese beginning to rebound, at least modestly. In fiscal years 2023 and 2024, the total diocesan net assets and liabilities increased from \$18.2 million to \$19.8 million.

#### B. Known Liabilities.

##### 1. Priest Pension Fund.

The priest pension account will receive a significant influx of capital in 2025 when assets from a trust are scheduled to be disbursed to the plan. This should assure that the plan's funding level is within the range recommended by Standard & Poors (80% or higher).

##### 2. Holy Name Cathedral.

The condition of the cathedral has deteriorated to the point that the most likely solution is to tear it down. Donors with restricted gifts to the cathedral fund have been contacted and the donations returned or re-directed according to the donors' instructions. It will be necessary to demolish the structure.

#### C. Sources of Income.

##### 1. Diocese and Parish Share Campaign (DPSC)

The Diocesan and Parish Share Campaign (DPSC) is the annual appeal for the Diocese of Steubenville. This last year, the diocesan share of the income was increased to \$1.5 million, the first increase since 2017. The diocese achieved 98% of its goal. Although the diocese increased its income by raising its share, the combined diocesan and parish income from the DPSC actually decreased \$145,000 in the last two years. This has resulted in less money remaining in the parishes.

##### 2. Cathedraticum.

The diocesan assessment income (cathedraticum), which is based on a percentage of parish offertory, increased slightly over the past two years. Long term, however, the projected decrease in the population will likely result in a decrease in parish income and a decrease in the cathedraticum.

##### 3. Oil and Gas Revenues.

The diocese administers the contractual agreements governing numerous oil and gas wells on parish properties. Currently, the diocese retains 30% of the royalties to cover

administrative costs and returns 70% to the parishes. This has been well received as an equitable distribution of the income from these wells.

#### 4. Investments.

Income from investments is heavily dependent on the rise and fall of the market. During fiscal years 2023 and 2024, investments increased from \$11.7 million to \$12.3 million.

#### D. Parish and School Finances.

Most of the diocese's 50 parishes and 2 missions are financially stable, but none are wealthy. A few are struggling, as much from a lack of parishioners as from a lack of finances. This reality highlights the need for pastoral planning, regardless of whether or not the diocese merges. Such parish reorganization will likely result in fewer parishes with a more efficient use of resources and a better distribution of priests.

Since the recent arrival of state-supported financial assistance for parents who choose to send their children to a Catholic School, the schools have done better financially. The diocese has 2 Catholic high schools and 8 primary schools. State aid for parents has helped enrollment, which is up 4.6% across the diocese for this year.

#### E. Future Needs.

The diocesan budget, currently balanced, provides only for basic services. If the diocese were to remain separate, then it would need a more robust budget to support pastoral growth and vitality. If that were to happen, the Consultors have identified the following needs which would require additional funding that the diocese does not currently have:

First in importance:

- Hire a Development Director with adequate IT and office support.

And then:

- Increase the presence of diocesan services in all 13 counties.
- Invest in and support evangelization.
- Expand Catholic Charities services to all 13 counties.
- Increase funding for seminary education.
- Increase support for campus ministry at Ohio University in Athens.

## **IV. DEMOGRAPHICS: GENERAL AND CATHOLIC POPULATION**

Population demographic trends in Ohio vary from diocese to diocese. According to catholic-hierarchy.org, between 1980 and 2022 Steubenville had the largest percentage decrease among the Ohio dioceses both in general population and in Catholic population. It is troubling to note that the diocese's Catholic population decreased at a much higher percentage (- 46.5%) than did the general population (- 13.4%).

The State of Ohio Department of Development's Office of Research predicts that Ohio's general population will decrease by 5.7% by 2050, with only a few counties showing actual growth, mostly in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the Diocese of Columbus.<sup>1</sup> As for the Diocese of Steubenville, the majority of population loss occurred between 1980 and 2010, but it continues even now. Between 2010 and 2020, Harrison County was the fastest shrinking county in Ohio (by percentage of the total, not by actual persons).<sup>2</sup>

According to the State of Ohio, every county in the Diocese of Steubenville is projected to experience a decline in the next 25 years. Athens, Carroll, Gallia, Guernsey, and Noble Counties are predicted to experience between a 10% to 20% decrease in population, while Belmont, Harrison, Jefferson, Lawrence, Meigs, Morgan, Monroe, and Washington Counties are all predicted to see between a 20% to 30% drop in population.<sup>3</sup> Given that there are presently only around 29,000 Catholics in the diocese, and that in recent decades the Catholic population has been decreasing at a rate more than three times that of the general population, these figures suggest a very problematic road ahead.

It should be noted that the percentage of Catholics in the general population continues to decrease in every diocese in Ohio. According to catholic-hierarchy.org, Catholics made up 12.4% of the population in the Diocese of Steubenville in 1950, dropping to 9.8% in 1980 and further dropping to 5.9% in 2023. Steubenville has fared better in this regard than Cleveland, Youngstown, and Cincinnati but worse than Toledo or Columbus. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the entire State of Ohio is becoming increasingly less Catholic.

## V. DEMOGRAPHICS: CLERGY AND VOCATIONS

The Diocese of Steubenville has the smallest Catholic population and correspondingly the fewest number of priests of any diocese in Ohio. Currently, there are 33 priests actively assigned to pastoral ministry in the diocese (excluding Franciscan University and the priests who study or work there). Of these priests, 29 are incardinated in the Diocese of Steubenville, 2 are religious, and 2 are externs. There are 16 permanent deacons incardinated in Steubenville, and there are no religious or extern permanent deacons serving in the diocese. In addition, 3 incardinated priests are active outside of the diocese: 1 serves at the Josephinum and 2 are in religious communities discerning religious life. There are 29 incardinated retired priests, some of whom still assist occasionally with the celebration of Mass.

Although the number of diocesan priests in Steubenville is small, the ratio of active (i.e., non-retired) diocesan priests to faithful in Steubenville (1 to 997) is better than anywhere else in Ohio. Even if those priests presently over retirement age but still active all chose to retire immediately, Steubenville's ratio would still be well ahead of the rest of Ohio.

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio Department of Development, December 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the US Census Bureau as reported in *The Columbus Dispatch*, 12 August 2021. An online article from September 4, 2023, identifies the 10 fastest-shrinking counties in Ohio; 8 of them are in the Diocese of Steubenville. See <https://www.newsbreak.com/a-z-animals-1693032/3145702959354-residents-are-fleeing-these-fastest-shrinking-counties-in-ohio>.

<sup>3</sup> Ohio Department of Development, December 2022.

With 10 seminarians, Steubenville has one of the highest ratios of seminarians to faithful in the United States. If all goes well, the projected priestly ordinations are: 0 in 2025, 2 in 2026, 0 in 2027, 2 in 2028, and 1 in 2029. As with all such information, there is no way to account for unforeseen circumstances.

## **VI. DIOCESAN ADMINISTRATION**

With there being no diocesan bishop, only an apostolic administrator, the office of Vicar General cannot be filled. Aside from this office, the remaining diocesan offices are staffed by competent, trained professionals.

The diocesan administration functions well but, due to numerous cost-reduction efforts over the years, the administration is largely limited to providing essential services. Some services, e.g., IT work, are now outsourced. Catholic Charities services throughout the diocese were gradually reduced over the years as a cost-saving effort; counseling services in the Steubenville area were recently restored. The positions of Executive Assistant to the Bishop, Vicar for Clergy, and Development Director were all eliminated. Diocesan officials are fully aware that organized efforts for development, growth of the annual appeal, and planned-giving all must be restored, either through a diocesan merger or by the diocese itself.

## **VII. OTHER ENTITIES WITHIN THE DIOCESE**

The following ecclesiastical entities within the Diocese of Steubenville merit mention.

### **A. Religious Institutes – Men.**

There are 5 religious institutes of men operative in the diocese: 1) Camaldolese Hermits, 2) Franciscan Friars, TOR, 3) Marians of the Immaculate Conception, 4) Canons Regular of the Holy Cross, and 5) Brothers of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Most are doing well, but the Brothers of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have only three remaining members.

### **B. Religious Institutes – Women.**

Religious institutes of women present in the diocese are: 1) Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, 2) Sisters of the Holy Cross, OA, 3) Daughters of Holy Mary of the Heart of Jesus, 4) Sisters of Saint Francis of Perpetual Adoration, 5) Sisters of Saint Francis of the Martyr Saint George, 6) School Sisters of Notre Dame, and 7) Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. Of these, the last 4 institutes have three or fewer sisters present.

Although canonically they are still a public association of the faithful and not yet a religious institute, the Franciscan Sisters, TOR, of the Penance of the Sorrowful Mother have a significant presence, especially in and around the City of Steubenville.

### C. Franciscan University.

Franciscan University plays a large role in ecclesial life in the Steubenville area. The university is juridically distinct from the diocese itself, but most of its faculty, staff, and administration are members of area parishes. Historically, the Diocese of Steubenville and Franciscan University seem to have enjoyed cordial relations but only with a limited interaction with each other.

### D. Other Apostolates.

The presence of Franciscan University has contributed to the growth of other apostolates in the area. Among the more noteworthy are: 1) College of Saint Joseph the Worker, 2) Apostolate for Family Consecration / Catholic Family Land, and 3) Saint Paul Center. Anecdotally, it is reported that young Catholic families are moving to Steubenville specifically because of the strong Catholic culture of the area supported not only by the parishes but also in part by Franciscan University and these other apostolates.

## VIII. THINGS NEEDED FOR THE CHURCH IN SOUTHEAST OHIO TO FLOURISH

This section considers what is needed for the Church in southeastern Ohio to flourish. Resources could come from within the existing 13 counties (without merging), from another diocese (via merger), or from external sources (e.g., from grants). They fall into three categories, as follows:

### a. Regardless of a whether or not the diocese merges:

- reinvigorate evangelization efforts
- undergo parish reorganization
- reduce the number of Masses
- restore active role of deans (there have been no visitations since COVID)
- increase Catholic Charities presence in other counties
- be sensitive to what people and clergy have experienced in this process
- provide leadership and vision

### b. In addition to the needs in (a) above, if the diocese merges into another diocese:

- take the time to make sure that things are done well

### c. In addition to the needs in (a) above, if there is no merger and the diocese continues as is:

- restore development director
- restore trust and hope for the future
- strengthen diocesan identity and bonds with the counties farther from Steubenville
- designate a new cathedral

## IX. CONCLUSION.

Presently, the diocese is viable. Looking ahead, however the forecasted decreases in both the diocese's general population and Catholic population pose the single greatest challenge to the

diocese continuing as a free-standing entity. This decrease in population will have considerable financial ramifications as the donor base shrinks. If nothing is done and diocesan and parish structures and services remain unchanged, the decreased donor base will eventually lead to deficit spending and financial instability.

Regardless of the decision to merge or to remain free-standing, whichever bishop assumes responsibility for these 13 counties will need to engage in serious pastoral long-range planning to ensure that the infrastructure and pastoral services remain proportionate to the population of the faithful.

We are left with two important questions:

1. Most of the things needed for the faith to flourish in southeastern Ohio are the same regardless of a merger or not. Pastorally, is merging or remaining free-standing the better way to provide for these things so that the faith can flourish?
2. If indications point to the likelihood that there is no long-term viability, then is it better to merge now while the diocese is still viable, or to do so only after the diocese is no longer viable?

#### **XI. ONE FINAL NOTE FROM BISHOP LOHSE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE:**

For over 80 years, you – the clergy, religious, and faithful of the Diocese of Steubenville – have given tremendous witness to your faith in Christ and your love of God and neighbor. You can rightly be proud of the diocese and all that you have accomplished with the help of God’s grace.

As we face difficult realities, the only way that we can do so is to be grounded in the truth. The Consultors and I have been as objective as possible in assessing the state of the diocese. Grace remains powerfully at work throughout the diocese, but there are also significant problems coming down the road. We cannot ignore these.

In our discernment, we have been asking, “What is the Lord asking of us?” He has helped us to affirm what is essential: our faith in God; our Baptismal call; our membership in the Body of Christ; the presence of Lord’s Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Eucharist; the call to give our whole selves to Christ who Himself held nothing back from us. We must unyieldingly hold firm to these things.

As for everything else, we will follow where He leads, no matter the cost, not because it’s easy (which it isn’t) but because it’s right. We do not know what the road ahead will bring, and that can be unnerving. But wherever He leads, we will travel that path together. That is the way of a disciple. That is our way.

Sincerely in Christ,

*+ Edward M. Lohse*

The Most Reverend Edward M. Lohse, JCD  
Apostolic Administrator of Steubenville