

Canon Law Guidelines for Naming a Catholic Parish

1. Canon law requires that our sacred buildings (churches, oratories and private chapels) must be blessed or dedicated and given a title of (1) the name of the Trinity, or (2) the name of Christ, invoked under a mystery of his life or under his name already used in the Mass, or (3) the name of the Holy Spirit, or (4) the name of Mary, under a given title already found in the Mass, or (5) the name of the Angels, or (6) the name of a canonized Saint in the Roman Martyrology, or (7) the name of a Blessed provided the Apostolic See has given it's permission. Canon law is silent on the matter of naming parishes but clarification was provided by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments on 10 February 1999, stating, "The name of a parish may commonly be the same name as the title of the parish church".

2. Canon law leaves it to the diocesan bishop to erect, suppress, or notably alter parishes. Since it is his prerogative to establish parishes, it is also his prerogative to name them.

3. Though there is no ambition on the part of anyone in the Archbishop's Office to attempt to stop the popular use of the phrase "Catholic Community" that, in some cases, has unofficially replaced the term "Parish" (e.g., St. Bartholomew Catholic Community), no such designation will appear on an official decree of erection/merger/suppression or subsequent decrees and correspondence relating to the parish. The phrase "Catholic Community" is a modern convention that could wane in future use. Furthermore, canon law gives legal personality to a "Parish", not a "Catholic Community". At this point in time, it would be imprudent to use the phrase beyond the level of common parlance.

4. The practice in the United States is to give a parish the name of a canonized Saint or other name listed in #1. The question of whether or not the merger of three parishes can give rise to a name such as "Pontiac Catholic Parish" is an interesting one, especially if there is a plan to maintain three churches within the new territorial parish. At this point in time, however, it would require Cardinal Maida's permission to break from the practice of giving a parish the name of canonized Saint or other name listed in #1. It should be remembered that such a change would create an inconsistency in the Archdiocese and, perhaps, confusion to our people inside and outside the parish in question. The new Pontiac parish should adopt the name of one of the existing churches or suggest a different name corresponding with those listed in #1.

5. In the case of parish mergers, the churches in the former parishes, in fact, retain their title; however, if a church building was simply blessed, and not dedicated, the name of the church can be changed by the diocesan bishop, for a grave reason, at the request of the pastor and parishioners. In the case of a dedicated church building, the name can only be changed with the permission of the Apostolic See.

If it happens that one of the churches within a newly merged parish will become the main worship site, as a rule, the parish should be given the name of that church. Nevertheless, there may be dynamics that make such designation contentious, in which case, it could be permitted that the parish be given a name different from the churches within the parish.

6. To revive those names that were used by parishes closed in 1990 and subsequent years, though technically allowed, may cause confusion in the minds of the faithful and in the records of the historical archives.

7. If the pastor (or administrator) and parishioners would like to submit more than one name, the Cardinal will certainly choose one.