

On the weekend November 2-3, parishioners at Immaculate Conception Church in Celina, St. Teresa in Rockford, and Our Lady of Guadalupe in Montezuma will officially become part of the Celina cluster. Previously, IC and St. Teresa were a cluster, and Our Lady of Guadalupe had its own pastor. When the unexpected death in July of Fr. Rick Nieberding, C.P.P.S., left Our Lady of Guadalupe without a pastor, a previously approved pastoral plan was set in motion, and the three will become one.

The new identity/new cluster will be symbolized at all Masses on November 2-3 when parishioners from all three parishes will be at each church, bearing a vessel of holy water from their respective parishes that will be poured into each church's baptismal font. All parishioners will be invited to renew their baptismal promises and then will be sprinkled with comingled holy water. A common Celina Cluster prayer will be recited at each Mass which concludes with, "Give us one mind and one heart as we journey together, building your kingdom, through Christ our Lord."

The unity that will flow forth will take shape in the months ahead, said Fr. Ken Schnipke, C.P.P.S., pastor of the cluster.

"The clustering process of parishes in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati goes back over 30 years," Fr. Schnipke said. As the new Celina cluster takes effect in November, all parishes in Mercer County are sharing pastors. Further, it's estimated that over two-third of Catholic parishes in the U.S. share a pastor. Other denominations too are experiencing the benefits and challenges of combining congregations.

In recent months, Fr. Schnipke has been working with a committee of parishioners from the three parishes that is planning how parish life in the new cluster will take shape. Representatives from each parish have been meeting regularly to discern the new Mass schedule, how to collaborate in religious education and how staff duties can be shared across the cluster.

In September, an information letter and Mass survey was sent to over 1,800 families in the Celina Cluster and the response was overwhelmingly positive. "A number of IC parishioners wrote on returned surveys, 'St. Teresa should decide the Sunday Mass time because they only have one weekend mass,'" said Charlie Mescher, an IC parishioner who is chairing the cluster committee. "There is a spirit of cooperation and goodwill among all three parishes that is enabling all three parish communities to remain open, alive and vibrant and moving into the future with hope."

Missionaries of the Precious Blood have ministered at all three parishes since they were founded, IC in 1864, Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1904, and St. Teresa in 1937.

IC is the largest parish with a thriving Catholic grade school, religious education program and over 75 ministry opportunities listed on the annual Stewardship sign up form. But change is also on the horizon for IC and there are different preferences to try to accommodate. "My wife and I were wondering if we could have two surveys to fill out because we had different mass preferences," said an IC parishioner. When asked how they resolved their dilemma the wife responded, "I filled out the form," and they both laughed.

Our Lady of Guadalupe has been a second home of retirees, farmers, young families and many others on the south side of the lake. The parish also has a heart for mission and service. "Our mission breakfasts have been well supported over the years and provided a lot of funds for our sister parish in La Labor,

Guatemala and other mission activities,” said an Our Lady of Guadalupe parishioner. “Our first big project was a well for clean water. Sounds simple to us, but everything to them.”

St. Teresa is the smallest parish in the cluster, but also the youngest and growing. Several years ago, they needed to combine several grades for religious education because there were not enough classrooms. “There are a lot of young families at St. Teresa and we like that,” said a St. Teresa parishioner. “When my children were growing up there were always other parents around to help when I had to take one to the bathroom and leave one or two in church.”

St. Teresa will have one weekend mass at 10 a.m. on Sunday and it will be a challenge to make room for everyone, but the parishioners are up to the challenge. Thirty-five folding chairs with attached desk tops have hung on a rack in the garage since moving to the new church in 2009. A parishioner recently removed all the desk tops, sanded down the welds and repainted the chairs so parishioners will have seats in the vestibule and sacristy. It’s also a savings for the church.

The Celina Cluster is about building the kingdom of God here on earth and everyone is invited on that journey. “It is a privilege and gift of grace working with the Cluster Committee and meeting parishioners at Our Lady of Guadalupe,” said Fr. Schnipke, who has been pastor of IC and St. Teresa for nine years and is now becoming the pastor of the Celina Cluster. He’ll have the help of Fr. Tim McFarland, C.P.P.S., the associate pastor.

“Folks have been very supportive and understanding along the way and they really want what’s best for all,” Fr. Schnipke said. “They want to see their parishes thrive and grow and be places of hospitality and welcome for all. By God’s grace, I’m sure it will be a future full of hope for all.”

Effective November 2-3, the new weekend Mass schedule is:

Saturday - 5 p.m. at Immaculate Conception; 7 p.m. at Our Lady of Guadalupe

Sunday – 8 a.m. at Immaculate Conception; 9 a.m. at Our Lady of Guadalupe; 10 a.m. at St. Teresa; 11 a.m. at Immaculate Conception

Office hours, religious education and other parish programs will continue to be offered onsite at each location. Contact 419-586-6648 or info@celina-ic.org for more information