

Dear Parishioners,

On this feast of the Epiphany, as we contemplate the journey of the Magi and our own journey in faith, I write to share news of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and our presence in Southwest Florida.

After prayerful discernment and in conversation with Bishop Frank J. Dewane, the Oblates have come to the realization that we simply do not have the priests to continue our ministry in Southwest Florida. Therefore, we made the difficult decision to conclude our presence in the Diocese of Venice at the end of June 2026.

The Oblates have served the Catholic people of Southwest Florida since 1982, beginning at St. Cecilia in Fort Myers. In 1990 we established Our Lady of Light in Estero, and in 2007 we assumed the pastoral leadership at St. Ann in Naples. Over these decades, many Oblates have been blessed to serve in these parish communities. We are deeply grateful for the relationships formed, the lives shared, the sacraments celebrated, and the faith strengthened through countless moments of grace—at the altar, in homes and hospitals, in classrooms, parish ministries, and in the daily work of discipleship.

In order to assure a smooth transition, Bishop Dewane and I have agreed on the following:

1. Our Lady of Light was entrusted to diocesan clergy on January 5, 2026.
2. St. Ann and St. Cecilia will continue to be served by the Oblates through the end of June 2026.


In the months ahead, the Diocese will continue planning so that each parish is well cared for. The Oblates will continue to serve at the parish through the end of June 2026, when Father Paul finishes his term as pastor.

We recognize that this news is difficult, especially after so many years of shared faith and friendship. Please know that the bond formed between St. Cecilia and the Oblates is a special relationship that can never be broken. These bonds formed - within families, ministries, and friendships - remain part of who we are, as the Body of Christ. We trust the Lord will continue to bless the parish with faithful shepherds and a thriving parish life.

We believe the Lord has allowed the Oblates to help plant "Salesian seeds" in this part of Florida - seeds of gentleness, humility, joyful holiness, and confidence in God's providence. And we are confident those seeds will continue to grow into the beautiful garden St. Francis de Sales so often spoke of, a living garden where charity flourishes, faith deepens, and Christ is known and loved.

Thank you for being part of our Oblate family, for your trust, your love, and the privilege of ministering with you. Please keep our parish families, the Diocese, and the Oblates in your prayers—and be assured of ours.

Sincerely,

  
Very Rev. John A. Kolodziej, OSFS  
Provincial

Hello friends and family of St. Cecilia,

Today Fr. Frank and I share with you some news which for us is sad and disappointing, frightening and challenging. As many of you know, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales were founded in Troyes, France, in 1875 and Oblates throughout the world have been celebrating the 150th anniversary of our founding in various ways during all of 2025 even as we have been celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of St. Cecilia Catholic Parish. The Oblates first came to the USA in 1893 and served first in the Northeast and later also came to serve in Florida at Fr. Lopez High School in Daytona Beach and after that to Fort Myers at Bishop Verot Catholic High School and St. Cecilia Catholic Community in 1982. The Oblates have been part and parcel of Our Lady of Light Catholic Community since its founding in 1990. Fr. Patrick O'Connor ministered to the Spanish-speaking community in the diocese first in Immokalee and for many years as pastor of Jesus the Worker here in Fort Myers. And since 2007 the Oblates have been serving at St. Ann in Naples, FL.

The Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales are an international community and are still vibrant and are flourishing with vocations in parts of the world like India and Western Africa. We experienced tremendous growth here in North America in the latter half of the 20th century such that we became two provinces in North America and for many years were the majority of the Oblates number-wise throughout the world, sending American Oblate missionaries abroad. While we still have vocations and are eagerly anticipating the ordination of another American Oblate priest in 2026, our numbers are diminishing such that our two North American provinces will recombine in 2027.

In Florida we have been hit especially hard with the death of Fr. Hugh McGuigan in November of 2024, the death of Fr. Michael Vogt in December of 2024, Fr. Stan's death in October of 2025 and the departure of Fr. Bill Davis from St. Ann's in December of 2025. Our prior provincial used to lament that he "had no depth on his bench." Our unfortunate Oblate reality is that we do not currently have anyone in the dugout to come out and pinch hit or replace someone who is ill or dies. Tomorrow, on Monday, January 5th, the Diocese will take over the administration of Our Lady of Light Catholic Community in Estero. On July 1st the Diocese of Venice will resume administration of St. Ann Parish in Naples, and on July 1st the Diocese of Venice will resume administration of St. Cecilia Catholic Community here in Fort Myers.

I accepted a six year term as pastor here and unfortunately, despite my best efforts at lobbying and cajoling, there is no Oblate to succeed me. Because our two provinces are combining, currently Fr. Frank and I are still discerning our next assignments as we want to be open to the needs of the combined province and new possibilities, whatever they may be. I have asked for and have been granted two months "off" to spend July and August with my mother in California before I begin my next assignment.

Please know that this news is as difficult for Fr. Frank and for me as it is for you. The Oblates do not want to leave SW Florida, to leave St. Cecilia, to leave you, but we also have to face our diminishment and aging and accept the reality of our situation, as difficult as that is for all of us. Please pray for us. Pray for vocations. Pray for discernment for us. And pray for the diocesan priests who will succeed us here, at St. Ann and tomorrow at Our Lady of Light. May God be blessed.