

Summaries of AOD Restructuring Listening Sessions

Dear Fellow Parishioners,

The following document summarizes the comments made at both Listening Sessions on the Archdiocesan Restructuring. I have tried to be as neutral as possible. Very few edits were made, and only for space and clarity, so you may encounter points you personally disagree with. My goal was to capture what was said as thoroughly and accurately as possible.

The commentary is organized into thematic sections. **When filling out the survey, I hope you'll find it useful to look through these pages, find arguments that resonate with you, and incorporate them into your submission.**

Sincerely,

Andrew F. Mutavdzija

St. Lucy Croatian Catholic Church — Points Made at Listening Sessions 1 & 2

The following is a compilation of points raised by parishioners at the two St. Lucy listening sessions held on May 2 and May 9, 2026. It is shared so that all current and former parishioners have access to what was discussed. The views expressed are those of the parishioners who spoke at the sessions.

Legal Protections and Canonical Status

- St. Lucy is a **personal parish** (Canon 518), officially established under then-Cardinal/Archbishop Maida to serve the Croatian-speaking faithful. It is not an administrative convenience but a formal Church recognition that the spiritual needs of cultural and linguistic communities deserve dedicated pastoral care.
- A personal parish enjoys the same canonical status and protections as any territorial parish, with a high standard required for suppression or merger.
- The primary question for evaluating St. Lucy's future should be: Does the Croatian Catholic community in Southeastern Michigan still exist and need this dedicated ministry? The answer is unequivocally **yes**.
- Church law (Canons 515 & 518) requires "**just cause**" — a legitimate, specific, and proportionate reason for the good of souls — to suppress or merge a parish.
- Closing a church building requires an even higher standard: "**grave cause**."
- According to guidance from the Congregation for the Clergy, declining numbers, priest shortages, or general diocesan reorganization plans do **not**, by themselves, constitute sufficient cause for closure.
- Because St. Lucy is a personal parish, its assets and the effort to build it belong to the people who built it. **It is not for the Archdiocese to take.**
- Any decision about St. Lucy's future must be made with full knowledge and good-faith consideration of its unique circumstances, canonical protections, and continuing pastoral mission.
- One non-Croatian, non-registered parishioner stated: "If it is a personal parish that is self-funded, all the resources and effort to build it belong to the people who built it. It is a personal parish; it should be honored. You cannot snatch this away."

Financial Viability

- St. Lucy is in a **strong financial position**. It carries no debt, operates with balanced budgets (sometimes with a surplus), and its 1996 building is in excellent condition requiring only routine maintenance.
- The parish recently received a transformational bequest of **over \$2 million** from parishioner Mary Sostarich, bringing total liquid assets to approximately **\$2.5 million**.

- Notably, the Diocese also received a donation of an equal amount (approximately \$2 million) from this same St. Lucy parishioner, making it unconscionable to shut down the very parish that generated such generosity only months or years later.
- St. Lucy is **not a financial burden on the Archdiocese**. It is a self-sustaining parish that contributes faithfully to diocesan assessments; it is a solution, not a problem.
- The church building is only approximately 30 years old, practically new compared to many other parishes under review, making it a strong candidate for sustainability on building condition and maintenance grounds alone.
- Concern was raised that closing the parish would result in its assets and relatively new facilities in a desirable area accruing to the Diocese, a heartbreaking outcome for parishioners after a 100-year struggle to build a viable parish.
- The parish's existence and future **should not be reduced to a financial analyst's bottom line**. Doing so ignores the rights, cultural diversity, and spiritual needs of the people it serves. "Our church is our people's retreat; it isn't just brick and mortar."
- If the Archdiocese's financial projections are based on the assumption that St. Lucy's parishioners would simply transfer to other Area 9 parishes, those projections are **inaccurate**. Most would not attend other Area 9 churches, and many could be lost to the faith entirely.

The Priest Shortage Issue

- St. Lucy identified a qualified, bilingual (Croatian and English-speaking) priest, **Fr. Matija Žugaj**, whose bishop was and remains ready to release him to serve at St. Lucy.
- A formal request was submitted to the Diocese on **February 24, 2026**, and was **rejected by the Archbishop's notice dated March 23, 2026**, with no explanation provided.
- This rejection is inexplicable and directly contradicts the Diocese's stated rationale that priest shortages are a primary driver of restructuring. "Who denies an ethnic church like Croatsians a priest that's ready to come?"
- The rejection gives the troubling impression that the Diocese may have **predetermined** the disbanding of St. Lucy without first conducting the required just-cause evaluation.
- The current temporary pastor is only serving St. Lucy through **June 21, 2026**, with no replacement named, effectively beginning a shutdown well before the July 2027 restructuring date presented at the listening sessions.
- A Croatian-speaking priest is not a luxury for an ethnic parish. He is **essential to its mission and identity**.
- A bilingual priest would also be an asset to the broader Archdiocese, as he could serve Mass in English at St. Lucy's and neighboring parishes, directly helping to address the priest shortage in the region.
- Comparison was made to Fr. Cos Fertik in Northern Michigan, who manages multiple parishes including an ethnic one, demonstrating that such arrangements are workable within the Archdiocese.

Accuracy of Sacramental & Membership Data

- The Archdiocese's planning packet shows zero baptisms, marriage, and funerals for the year 2024, which we know to be false. This creates a deeply misleading impression of a parish with no sacramental activity and no living future.
- Decisions built on incorrect data risk becoming incorrect decisions. Accurate information is essential for just outcomes.
- The restructuring models also appear to evaluate St. Lucy based on **geographic and territorial metrics** that do not apply to a personal ethnic parish, whose membership is drawn from across the entire region rather than a local neighborhood.
- Whether or not the church should have Masses does not depend on where it is geographically located, as presented in the restructuring plans. The parish draws people from well outside Planning Area 9.

Unique Regional Role & Community Served

- St. Lucy is the **only Croatian Catholic parish in the state of Michigan** and one of only three ethnic parishes in all of AOD Planning Area 9.
- It serves Croatian Catholics from across the entire region: Downriver, Ann Arbor, Oakland County, and the east side of the state, with many traveling 30 or more minutes or over an hour each way.
- The parish does **not compete** with neighboring territorial parishes. It complements them by serving a distinct community that those parishes cannot serve.
- Mass and confession are offered in Croatian, and cultural devotions and traditions are maintained, providing a cultural and linguistic bridge that keeps people connected to the Church who might otherwise drift away.
- In the past, the parish has offered **English Mass on Saturday and both English and Croatian Masses on Sunday**, welcoming non-Croatian parishioners from the surrounding geographic area.
- Many current parishioners are **not Croatian** but attend because of the welcoming community, the cultural richness, and the quality of the parish, demonstrating its broader appeal.
- Most of the Croatian immigrant community arrived within the **last 30 years**. This is not a dying community but an active, living one still receiving new immigrants and registering them at the parish.
- Closure would leave elderly parishioners who have confessed and worshipped in Croatian their entire lives without spiritual comfort, and would sever young families from their heritage and faith.

- If St. Lucy closes, its parishioners would **not simply migrate to other Area 9 parishes**. They would likely attend parishes closer to their homes in other districts, or potentially leave the Church altogether, representing a net loss to the Archdiocese's overall Catholic attendance.
- Eliminating St. Lucy would effectively **silence the entire Croatian language group** and Croatian-American people, who have a right to representation in Michigan and the United States. "For us to be dismembered would be a catastrophe."
- St. Lucy is one of only three ethnic churches among the many English-speaking parishes in Planning Area 9 and should be treated differently than the others.

Identity & History of St. Lucy

- St. Lucy Croatian Catholic Church has served the Croatian-American Catholic community in Michigan for over a century, originating as St. Jerome Parish in 1924 (and even earlier at an Oakland Ave. location), moving to 8 Mile Rd. in 1955, and relocating to its current Troy location in 1996.
- The parish is united not by geography but by shared Croatian faith and heritage. It is a people, a mission, and a living testament to generational faith passed down through generations, with some families having been members for **seven generations**.
- Croatian Catholics held the historic title *Antemurale Christianitatis* ("Bulwark of Christendom"), bestowed by Pope Leo X in 1519, reflecting centuries of steadfast Catholic fidelity through defending against generations of Ottoman onslaughts.
- Archbishop Vigneron himself, at the parish's centennial Mass just over a year ago, proclaimed the community a "great gift of fidelity" to the Church in Detroit.
- The parish preserves sacred relics, statues, altars, and Stations of the Cross passed down through generations.
- **The church was literally built by its parishioners.** They built the doors, laid the floors, and contributed their own labor and money. When the old St. Jerome was sold, parishioners took \$750,000 from that sale to purchase and build the current Troy church. It was not built by the Archdiocese.
- The church has been a **safe haven and home** for Croatian immigrants. For many, it was the first place in America where they felt safe, seen, and understood, hearing their own language and finding community when they had left family behind.
- For many parishioners, this is not merely a church. It is where they cry together at funerals, get married, raise children, and find their extended family. "If you take it away from us, you are doing a great hardship to our people."
- Some parishioners drive **over 120 miles round trip** to attend, and over **33 people at Session 1 raised their hands** indicating they drive more than 30 minutes to get there.
- One parishioner shared that their family was among the founding members of St. Jerome, that their mother worked in the kitchen, and that this is now their third Croatian church home. "To call this just a church is not giving the proper name for what it is."
- A younger parishioner shared that they were baptized at St. Lucy, that their godfather traveled from Canada for the baptism, and that the church was their family's rock when they fled death and destruction. "This is faith we are speaking about."

- A second-generation Croatian parishioner emigrated from Toronto, was guided by Fr. Nikola, found their wife, and put three kids through Catholic school. Their wife is not Croatian and their kids don't speak Croatian, yet the whole family attends every Sunday and is committed to growing the next generation of the parish.

Proposed Alternatives & Model Suggestions

- **Preferred approach:** Allow St. Lucy to continue serving its unique parishioner base with the immediate transfer of Fr. Žugaj, using its own financial resources. The parish has already solved both the financial and priest-shortage concerns on its own.
- Of the four options presented (A through D), **Option B is the only one** in which St. Lucy remains a parish with Mass. The other three options effectively cross it out.
- **Option B:** St. Lucy Croatian Parish is sustained as a full worship site with at least one Mass.
- **Specific merger proposal:** Merge St. Lucy with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and St. Thomas More, with St. Lucy's facility capable of accommodating an estimated 500 people per Mass.
- **Renaming suggestion:** Rename to "St. Lucy Catholic Church and Croatian American Parish" to welcome non-Croatian parishioners while maintaining ethnic identity and potentially growing attendance.
- If a standalone ethnic parish is not possible, consider merging with **other ethnic parishes** (e.g., Lithuanian, Albanian) rather than pursuing a full closure or merger into a standard territorial parish.
- **Practical suggestion:** Reduce the number of Masses at larger, underutilized nearby parishes (e.g., Holy Name, Birmingham, which does not fill pews at its 8 a.m. Mass) to free up a priest to serve St. Lucy's single Mass. Holy Name is only 3 miles away.
- **Idea to expand the property:** Build adjoining senior housing using existing parish funds, which would also necessitate a dedicated priest and further justify St. Lucy's continued operation.
- **Idea to add catechism rooms** to expand the parish's educational and community offerings.
- At minimum, the parish requests **at least one Mass**, even if on a Saturday, to preserve its sacramental life and community.
- A non-Croatian parishioner who also attends St. Elizabeth Ann Seton noted that St. Lucy is a better and larger building than St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, has icons and statues, and would be the stronger facility to retain if a choice must be made.
- A request was also made for the possibility of a **Latin Mass** at St. Lucy.

Additional Points Raised

- A reported miraculous occurrence at St. Lucy (described by parishioners Violet Chunko and Božidar) was suggested as a potential draw for attendance, with a proposal that St. Lucy be recognized as a shrine, similar to the Martyr Shrine in Midland, Ontario.
- **"Buildings are not churches. People are."**

- The restructuring process does not address the **root cause** of declining Catholic attendance, namely, how to bring the next generation back to the faith. Closing beloved parishes accelerates departure from the Church rather than reversing it.
 - The restructuring models fail to account for **socio-economic and social dynamics**. People attend church not only for prayer but for habit and social community, and someone from a more affluent area may not feel comfortable traveling to a different socio-economic area, and vice versa. These human factors are not reflected in the current models.
 - The more churches that are closed and stripped of Masses, the **less overall Catholic attendance** will be. The Archdiocese must reckon with the fact that some people will simply stop going to church if their parish is eliminated.
 - Some parishioners drew a painful parallel to **Communist-era suppression** of religion and ethnic identity, saying the situation “feels like Communism all over again” and that the community feels discriminated against as an ethnic group that has been present for over 100 years.
 - Proposals were raised for **educated deacons** to serve Masses where priests are unavailable.
 - A suggestion was made to **revisit the celibacy rule** as a long-term solution to the priest shortage, potentially attracting more men to the priesthood.
 - The process must be **transparent**, alternatives to closure must be **genuinely explored**, and the particular character of each parish must be respected.
 - The focus of restructuring should not only be on closures but also on **renewal**.
 - The parish’s young members and second-generation Croatian-Americans are committed to growing the parish, welcoming English-speaking members, raising the next generation, and ensuring St. Lucy’s future. “We will not let it die. We will grow it.”
 - **“We are not leaving. We do not want to go.”**
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