

# Our Lady of Visitation Mission in Adams County faces closure due to pastor shortage

Parishioners hope to save their small community chapel from being decommissioned



Kathryn Scott, YourHub

Father John Paul Leyba leads parishioners of Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church in the celebration of palm Sunday mass on April 9, 2017 in Denver. Members of this Holy Trinity Catholic Church are trying to save their small community church from being closed by the Archdiocese of Denver.

By **MEGAN MITCHELL** | [mmitchell@denverpost.com](mailto:mmitchell@denverpost.com) | The Denver Post

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A small, unassuming church made of pink bricks sits tucked among a tightly packed neighborhood of modest homes. On Palm Sunday, dozens of worshippers swarmed there from every direction, gathering just outside the wooden double doors that lead into Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church.

About 150 parishioners encircled their pastor of the past six years, Rev. John Paul Leyba, as he blessed a throng of fresh green palms for the traditional Mass the week before Easter — possibly for the last time.

“As far as we know, our last Mass at Our Lady of Visitation will be held April 30 because there are no more priests available to do Mass there,” said Pierre Lopez, 57, president of the management council for Our Lady of Visitation, and a seventh-generation parishioner there. “The Archdiocese has said that their intention is to close us no matter what.”

Last fall, two representatives from the Archdiocese of Denver came to the little pink church at 2531 W. 65th Place in south Adams County and spoke to the 10-member council, which manages the bills and day-to-day operations of the church. According to Lopez, the Archdiocese told the council that there aren’t enough priests to go around, and that their congregation would eventually be absorbed into its mother parish, Holy Trinity Catholic Church, which has around 3,000 members.

“The wish of the pastor is to bring this community into the greater fold of his community of Holy Trinity,” said Karna Swanson, spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Denver. “This is not in any way a community that we don’t care about. This is a community that the Holy Trinity parish and the pastor want to serve, and Father Leyba feels the best way to do that is to bring them into the greater fold.”

Our Lady of Visitation is actually a mission of Holy Trinity parish, which is about 2 miles north on Federal Boulevard.

Leyba’s parish is Holy Trinity, but about six years ago, he began saying Mass at Our Lady of Visitation once a week. Since then, Holy Trinity lost one of its three pastors, and the burden of 16 Masses per week for the Holy Trinity community fell to Leyba and another pastor.

“They have a lot on their plates, so they made a decision with their pastoral council and our finance council that made sense for the parish,” Swanson said. “It’s up to the pastor to begin or end a mission in their parish.”

Earlier this month, Leyba announced plans to leave the church in a letter to parishioners. He wrote: “While I was initially uncomfortable with the possibility of this change in Holy Trinity’s mission ministry, I now realize that this is the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading us for the benefit of the spiritual growth of each member of the mission and the other parishes.”

Parishioners said they were informed in the letter, which was left in the pews after Mass on April 2, that Masses would cease May 1. Leyba has been appointed pastor of St. Frances Cabrini Parish in Littleton, and will move there in June.

That was meant to be the end of it, but it’s a tough pill to swallow for the hundreds of people baptized, confirmed and married in Our Lady of Visitation over the decades.

“Since then, we’ve called several churches and several priests who have retired. We have found four priests who told us they would come and give us Mass once a week,”

said Maria Cabrales, business liaison for Our Lady of Visitation. "They all told us we would need permission from the Archdiocese first, though. So, we asked for another meeting with the Archdioceses so we can tell them, and they didn't come. They canceled the night before."

That left some parishioners feeling like they weren't going to even get a chance to keep their church open. But in the Catholic Church, the archbishop is the only one who can assign a pastor.

"I think (Leyba) would appreciate help from a retired pastor to come in and alleviate some of that burden at Holy Trinity, and that might be a better place to put their focus," Swanson said. "It's up to the pastor who does or doesn't say Mass there, and at this point, he's made the decision that if a brother priest was going to help out, he'd rather have them help out at a Mass for Holy Trinity parish."

There are 109 pastorates in the Archdiocese of Denver, and 146 locations where mass is said, which includes missions.

"I don't think the Archdiocese is communicating with us at all," Lopez said. "They've left us out of the loop ever since they came down last November to give us the shock of our lives and tell us they were closing us down. I kept trying to get in touch with them, and I'm getting nowhere with this."

Some lingering questions were addressed in the next community newsletter, which came out after Mass on Palm Sunday. In it, Leyba said that the mission property will remain available for community events, like the annual community bazaar in July, but those events will require approval from the pastor.

He also addressed what's going to happen with the approximately \$250,000 that the parishioners say they have collected and raised specifically to benefit their church. He wrote that Holy Trinity Parish and the Archdiocese of Denver will honor all gifts and restrictions on those gifts, and that any concerns or claims to the money will be addressed on a case-by-case basis by the pastor and Archdiocese of Denver.

Our Lady of Visitation was first built out of two street cars in 1949 on land donated by a parish family whose grandchildren still go to church there at 10:45 a.m., every Sunday.

"My grandfather built this church," said Westminster resident Carol Perez, whose grandfather was Benito Garcia. "I was baptized here, I was married here 34 years ago, both of my children were baptized and have received all their sacraments here. This church was built for this community to pray, to feel safe, to be spiritual and to come together in peace. That's all we want."