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The Assumptionists are rededicating themselves to St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish in Sturbridge by establishing a new local community of men there.

Assumptionist Father Dennis M. Gallagher, provincial superior of the North American Province, made the announcement after Masses this past weekend. He said the number of priests serving the parish has been dwindling. Currently there are two Assumptionist priests assigned to cover the parish and St. Anne Shrine – Father Peter R. Precourt, pastor, and Father Peter Omwoyo, associate. The parish of 1,300 registered families is not staffed by diocesan priests.

“Two people do not make a community,” Father Gallagher said. “We are at a crossroads and we can’t continue to be a presence at St. Anne’s with only two people.”

Father Gallagher said Bishop McManus was pleased when he informed him that the Assumptionists will be making personnel changes to ensure that a community of three men would live at the parish and shrine.

Constituting a local community of at least three assures that “we have a community carrying out the essential elements of religious life,” living together and praying together, Father Gallagher said.

For the past year the pastor has gotten help with sacramental ministry on the weekends from the Emmanuel House Assumptionist community in Worcester.

Effective Aug. 1, Father Alex Castro, 46, will be the new pastor, Father Gallagher announced. Father Castro, a native of the Philippines, is also serving as the provincial treasurer, responsible for the United States, Mexico and Quebec. He spent his novitiate at St. Anne and St. Patrick, followed by his first profession of vows in 2004, according to an interview published on the Assumptionists’ website.

According to Father Gallagher, Father Precourt, “who has served the parish generously for a number of years,” will not be leaving right away. He has been pastor since 2005 and will stay through the end of the year to help with the transition.

Father John Franck, 71, a native of Pittsburgh and former provincial of the province, will become a full-time associate beginning in October. Father Franck is currently undertaking a special assignment to translate into English the body of spiritual writing of Assumptionist founder Father Emmanuel d’Alzon, Father Gallagher said.

Brother Paul Henry will return to the parish and resume teaching adult education there. Brother Paul had served at the parish and now resides at Old English Road in Worcester, which is basically a retirement community, Father Gallagher said. Brother Paul also works part time as guestmaster at St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer and will continue to do so.

With the new community established in Sturbridge, Father Omwoyo will go to Boston College to study full time, Father Gallagher said. Father Omwoyo will stay at the parish until early summer.

To fill the gap, Father Jerome Lively, a Scripture teacher at Assumption College, will spend the months of June and July at St. Anne’s.

Parish secretary Elaine O’Connor said the people are still trying to digest the announcement that their pastor of 13 years is leaving.

“We are so blessed. He is so Christ-centered. We couldn’t have a better priest and a better boss. His vision here has made such a difference,” she said.

The Augustinians of the Assumption (the Assumptionists) have run the parish and shrine since 1955.

A history of the parish on its website notes that two churches were established in 1883 to serve the many Irish and French Canadians who came to the area to work in the textile mills. The parishes were combined in 1887.

The establishment of St. Anne Shrine came as a result of the failing health of Msgr. Elzear Brochu, a Southbridge pastor, who “pledged to St. Anne that if he were to regain his strength, he would propagate her devotion by building a shrine in her honor. ... The first claim of a cure in 1887 started an influx of pilgrims which has continued to this day.”

Father Gallagher said part of the work of the new community will be to determine what they want to do with the shrine, which has been underutilized.

He mentioned that the parish will also be strengthened by the presence of additional Assumptionist lay associates. He commissioned more than a dozen at the parish in March.

Sylvia Desautels, the parish faith formation secretary, is one of about 16 lay associates. She explained that lay associates are not like any other parish organization with a specific role, they are not project driven, but follow the way of life of the Assumptionists.

“We come together with Christ being the center of our lives to grow spiritually,” she said. “If we are sincere in doing this, it affects everything we do and everyone we encounter.”

The lay associates “bring spirituality to the ministry we do,” she said, and respond when asked to do something for the parish. The associates have talked about being more involved with the shrine, she said, but they are waiting to see what the new community wants them to do.

The lay associates also have an education apostolate and support students in the Philippines, she said.

Father Gallagher said St. Anne and St. Patrick is valuable for helping in the vocational

formation of young people. The parish has served as a place for new Assumptionists from around the world to experience pastoral ministry. Father Gallagher said Filipino candidates were prepared in Worcester from 1999-2006 as the community was preparing a foundation in the Philippines. They often would spend summers at the parish as part of their study.