News

A photo of a white older man in a clerical collar is next to a photo of a brown man wearing gla

Bishop Paul J. Bradley, apostolic administrator of Steubenville, Ohio, and Bishop Earl K. Fernandes of Columbus, Ohio, are pictured in a combination photo. They two dioceses have been asked to provide data to Pope Francis regarding a potential merger. (OSV News photo/courtesy Diocese of Steubenville/courtesy Archdiocese of Cincinnati)

Gina Christian

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 13, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Two Ohio dioceses are considering a potential merger, according to a joint letter issued Dec. 11 by Bishop Earl K. Fernandes of the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, and Bishop Paul J. Bradley, apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, who said they "have begun very preliminary discussions regarding the potential merger of the dioceses."

The bishops said "the Apostolic Nunciature has asked the dioceses to work together to consider how different dimensions of the dioceses, including the temporal aspects of life, might be affected by such a proposal."

The move comes a year after a similar attempt was put on hold by former Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton.

In October 2022, Monforton -- whom Pope Francis appointed auxiliary bishop of Detroit in September -- announced a potential merger of the dioceses due to a downturn in demographics and vocations.

The prospect sparked "disappointment and even fear," Monforton later admitted in a Nov. 7, 2022, letter to the diocese announcing the merger plans had been temporarily shelved.

Advertisement

Now, "while no decision has been made, due diligence is needed so an educated and responsible decision can be discerned in a timely manner," wrote Fernandes and Bradley.

"Ultimately the decision is up to the Holy Father," they wrote. "The work has begun, and as the work continues, updates will be provided."

They asked clergy and laity "to pray that the unified work may be fruitful."

The Vatican erected the Columbus diocese in 1868. It covers 23 counties in central and south central Ohio. Created in 1944, the Steubenville diocese covers 13 counties in southeastern Ohio. According to 2021 statistics, the Columbus diocese has a Catholic population of nearly 290,000 out of a total population of just over 2.8 million. Statistics on the Steubenville Diocese from 2020, the latest available, show that there are just over 30,000 Catholics out of a total population of about 496,000.

Besides Columbus and Steubenville, Ohio has three other Catholic dioceses, Cleveland, Toledo and Youngstown, and one archdiocese, Cincinnati.