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Bell Tower Demolition Marks Turning Point in Future of St. John the Baptist, Maria Stein

Today, the bell tower of St. John the Baptist Church in Maria Stein is being carefully demolished following the collapse of the west wall of the church on Monday, December 29, 2025. Seven months after a fire ravaged St. John the Baptist Church, the west wall of the church collapsed last week due to high winds and the declining condition of the remaining structure.

After consultation with structural engineers and safety officials, church leadership determined that demolition of the church and removal of the bell tower was necessary to protect the surrounding area and ensure public safety. The collapse of the west wall and concerns that the bell tower could also collapse and fall onto State Route 119 were serious safety issues that required immediate action. FIRST ONSITE explored options to remove only the upper portion of the tower, but structural engineers and demolitions teams determined that this could not be done safely. Demolition crews arrived on site on Friday, January 2.

Father Ken Schnipke, pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish, said, "This is a difficult day for our parish. But it is also an important one in the journey of our parish into the future of St. John the Baptist Church." Reflecting on the wind that collapsed the west wall last week he added, "In the beginning, God created all things and breathed new life into our world. Perhaps the wind of God is breathing new life into St. John the Baptist Church."

Since the time of the fire, parish leaders have worked diligently to safeguard the church's patrimony. Over the past four months, significant efforts have been made to preserve sacred items, artwork, furnishings, and architectural elements so they may be respectfully incorporated into a future church. These efforts include: stained glass windows that were removed and are being restored by Window Creations; approximately 1,040 of the church's 1,323 organ pipes, which were removed, cleaned and are being safely stored; and the removal of the main front entry doors, frames and stained glass transom windows. With the demolition now underway, extensive work, carried out with intentional care, has been done to protect the façade of the front entrance and other decorative stonework around the church.

While today's work marks the visible end of the striking bell tower that soars above the farm fields in Maria Stein, it does not mark the end of the parish community. Church leaders are grateful for the care, professionalism, and pastoral attention shown throughout this process, as well as for the continued prayers and support of the faithful.

Plans for the future worship space will focus on continuity, remembrance, and hope, honoring the legacy of the past while providing a spiritual home for generations to come.

The St. John Building and Architect Committee is in the final stage of selecting and hiring an architecture firm to help the community envision the future of St. John the Baptist Church. More information will be shared when available.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati is the 45th largest Catholic diocese in the country, with nearly 440,000 Catholics, and has the fifth largest Catholic school system in terms of enrollment with more than 41,000 students. The 19-county territory includes 199 canonical parishes organized into 57 Families of Parishes, and 111 Catholic primary and secondary schools.