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Holy Family doors reach for past glory

151-year-old church survived Chicago Fire and more

BY WILLIAM MULLEN
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Battered and rotted in places by exposure to 151 years of Chicago weather, six massive wooden doors that hundreds of thousands have passed through since the Civil War are getting an overhaul.

They are the front doors to the city's second-oldest church, the vast and striking Holy Family Catholic Church at 1080 W. Roosevelt Road. The Paul Borg Construction Co. of Chicago has been taking them to its South Side shops and restoring them to their original grandeur from when the church was completed in 1860.

Holy Family Church survived the 1871 Chicago Fire but in 1990 the building was only narrowly saved from the wrecking ball, thanks largely to a stunt that raised \$300,000 in five days hatched by a priest and a public relations executive.

Since then the church has raised more than \$5 million and restored much of the building's original elegance. Now the parish's current administrator, the Rev. Jeremiah Boland, said it is time to fix the front

doors.

"In the winter, it left such big, open gaps to the outside that we had to shovel out snow from the indoor vestibule," Boland said. "After the snowstorm last Feb. 2, we had three feet of snow to shovel out."

Borg Construction has been removing layers of old paint, redoing old joinery and replacing outmoded locks on the doors, which are 12 feet 6 inches tall and nearly four inches thick. Made of Douglas fir, each weighs about 600 pounds.

The doors have previously had only patchwork repairs despite their advanced age. That is perhaps a testimonial to the craftsmen hired by Father Arnold Damen after he founded Holy Family Parish in 1857.

Damen, for whom the Chicago avenue is named, wanted the best and went looking for Old World craftsmen who had immigrated to Chicago. He found a German-trained sculptor who was carving cigar store Indians for a living and hired him to carve Holy Family's exquisite wooden statuary and altar. A Lutheran sculptor was hired to carve the church's much admired altar railing. Damen also commissioned the first stained glass windows in the city.

What they built is some-



ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Jesse Orozco, of Paul Borg Construction Co., restores a door from Holy Family Catholic Church. His deadline is Nov. 6, when three weddings are scheduled in the church.

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—the Rev. Jeremiah Boland

times called "the Cathedral on the Prairie."

By the late 1980s, however, the church and the neighborhood around it were deteriorating and the Jesuits decided it was time to tear the building down. At least \$1 million was needed for renovations, so Father George Lane, a Jesuit and architectural historian, started a fundraising

group to meet a Jan. 1, 1991, deadline.

By Christmas 1990, the group had only \$700,000. Lane called a friend of his in public relations, Dick Barry, for help.

Knowing that news editors are frantic for news between Christmas and New Year's Day, Barry had Lane organize 30 parishioners to huddle in the bitter cold outside the locked front doors of Holy Family the day after Christmas. A press release said they had started a five-day, last-gasp vigil to reach the \$1 million goal.

"The next night there were 60 people keeping the vigil at the doors," Barry said. "The night after that, the police were out there directing traffic, there were

so many people."

The story made national television and CNN put it on their worldwide cable broadcasts; money and pledges came in from all over.

By the deadline, \$1,011,000 had been raised.

Since then, with the expansion of the University of Illinois campus and the nearby medical center, the neighborhood has been gentrifying.

The aim is for all six of the old front doors to be restored and back in place by Nov. 6, when three weddings are scheduled, Boland said.

"The doors now should give us another 151 years of service," he said.

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