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Angels herald a golden era for church

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For decades, the orchestra of wooden angels stood neglected in the organ loft of Holy Family Catholic Church in Chicago. Some were missing fingers, feet or pieces of their instruments. Others had bad gashes from falling so many times. But on Wednesday the church marked the completion of a two-year restoration project and unveiled the newly stunning collection of 29 angels, repaired and gilded in 23-carat gold leaf.

The intricately carved collection, including an orchestra of angels playing flute, clarinet, violin, French horn and drums, is believed to be the largest group of wooden statues in the world created by 19th Century sculptor Charles-Olivier Dauphin of Montreal.

The revived golden angels are the latest development in a massive \$6.5 million renovation of historic Holy Family, at 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd., the city's second oldest Catholic church. The church also acquired a rare Frobenius organ from Denmark this year with expenses paid by two Chicago-based foundations, the Rice Foundation and the Hooper Foundation (this sentence as published has been corrected in this text). The organ was shipped and installed in time for Christmas services. Holy Family's organ loft had been silent since 1970, when the church sold its original Louis Mitchell organ in a desperate bid for money.

Rev. Jeremiah Boland, administrator of Holy Family, said the angels will allow the church's French-Canadian history to live on for generations. Eventually, the celestial musical ensemble will be placed on top of the massive organ facade, nearly four stories above the church floor. Funds are still being raised to erect scaffolding to support the angels.

In many ways, the resurrection of the Dauphin angels is similar to the revival of Holy Family itself. Built in 1857, the church was founded by Jesuit priest Rev. Arnold Damen, who hired French-Canadian artists to decorate the building and build the organ. The church was dubbed "the European cathedral on the prairie."

By 1984, however, Holy Family had fallen into decay and was slated for demolition.

In 1990, a national appeal led by Rev. George Lane raised enough funds to start renovations and save the church. This Christmas, the angels sing for the church's future.

"These angels are one of the hidden treasures of Chicago and another remarkable chapter in the history of this church," Boland said. "Every church keeps telling its story, and this is a triumphant moment for this church. It speaks to the new life that is also bursting in this community."

The painstaking task of cleaning and gilding each angel was done by Dieter Meister, a retired painter and decorator from Lombard who volunteered his services.

Meister said he was drawn to the project because it seemed so challenging. Each angel required about 40 to 60 hours of cleaning. Gilding the statues required another two days each. The project took more than 1,500 hours over two years.

"After the first one was done, there was no turning back," Meister said. "I saw that angel and was so enchanted by it. Then, it just became a labor of love.

"As I worked, I noticed the amazing detail on the eyelids and noses. Each angel is individual from their hairdo to the smiles on their faces."

The angels include a 24-member orchestra of small angels along with five larger figures: King David playing the harp; St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music; the prophet Deborah; and two allegorical figures holding music compositions.

Michel Lafleur, a Quebec government representative who works in Chicago, said he thinks of the restored angels with a mix of pride and envy. Most of Dauphin's works have perished in church fires, he said, and only a handful exist in Canada.

"This is important to us as French-Canadians because this is what kept us together, the churches," he said. "They are preserving the angels well. They belong here."

Holy Family's early congregations were made up of Irish immigrants; more than one-third of Chicago's Irish can trace their roots to the church, according to its archives. Next came German and Italian immigrants, and by the 1990s parishioners were mostly African-American and Latino.

In recent years, new townhouses and condominiums near Holy Family have changed the church's face again, Boland said. The 300 families in the congregation include whites, blacks, Latinos and Asians.

The angels are on display on the main altar at Holy Family, where the public may view them during Christmas and New Year's services. To celebrate the angels' rebirth, Boland said, the choir will be performing a special rendition of the Christmas classic "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."