

Los Angeles Times

Flock of angels heralds recovery for one church

The newly renovated statues are the latest sign of preservation at a once-doomed building.

By Margaret Ramirez, Chicago Tribune

December 24, 2006

CHICAGO — 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.

But last week, the church marked the completion of a two-year restoration project and unveiled the collection of 29 angels, repaired and gilded in 23-carat gold leaf.

The intricately carved collection, which includes 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 \$6.5-million renovation of historic Holy Family, the city's second-oldest Catholic church. The church also purchased a rare Frobenius organ from Denmark, which was 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 would help the church's French-Canadian history live on for generations. Eventually, the celestial ensemble will be placed on top of the organ facade, nearly four stories above the church floor.

Built in 1857, 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 raised enough money to start renovations and save the church.

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

"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."