

GAZETTE

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"Miracle on Roosevelt Road," Holy Family celebrates 150 years

By Felicia Schneiderhan

"Let us offer one another a sign of the Lord's peace...."

Every Sunday morning at Holy Family Parish, 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd., parishioners do what you might expect when the Rev. Jerry Boland tells them to offer a sign of peace to their neighbors. They turn first to their families, shaking hands, then to those in the pew in front of them, then to those behind them. Then, the parishioners do something quite extraordinary: they leave the pews. They begin to walk the aisles, shaking hands and offering peace to every person they see— young, old, Black, White, Latino, Asian. As the banner at the altar proclaims, "Holy Family: Our Doors Are Open Wide;" every person is welcome, and everyone who comes is part of the family.



Rev. Jerry Boland has served as administrator of Holy Family Parish for the past five years. He describes Holy Family as "one of Chicago's oldest churches and one of its newest parishes."

This year, Holy Family, Chicago's second oldest parish, celebrates 150 years of service to Chicago citizens—many of them immigrants—beginning with the Irish and Germans, then Italians, and more recently Mexicans and Blacks.

Cardinal Francis George will lead the 150th anniversary mass on Sunday, Dec. 30, at 9:45 a.m., which also is the liturgical feast of the Holy Family. The public is invited.

In the beginning

The Rev. Arnold Damen, a Jesuit priest, began construction on Holy Family church in 1857, in the midst of a financial panic, with donations from the poor. "It became a powerful symbol of faith in the future of the city," wrote the Rev. George Lane in his essay *The Miracle on Roosevelt Road*, which will appear in the parish's 150th anniversary book by the same name. This anthology of essays is a volunteer effort led by parishioner Tom McElligott, to be released early next year.

When the Great Chicago Fire started in 1871, the flames were approaching the church when Fr. Damen, who was in Brooklyn, heard of the impending disaster. He invoked Our Lady of Perpetual Help, promising to light seven candles if the church was spared from the fire. The wind shifted and the church survived. Seven candles were lit, later replaced by gas lights, and today, seven electric lights burn at the shrine in the church's east transept.

Among Holy Family's parishioners at that time were Patrick and Catherine O'Leary, owners of the much maligned cow.

In 1890, Holy Family was the largest English-speaking parish in the country, with more than 25,000 parishioners. By 1984, it had dwindled to fewer than 200 parishioners, and leaking roofs and falling plaster had forced the church to close the main sanctuary. For the next ten years the congregation, composed mostly of African-Americans, held Mass in a chapel at the building's north end. At Christmas in 1987, Holy Family pastor the Rev. William Spine announced the church would be razed and replaced with a smaller structure.

Parishioners responded by forming the Save the Church Committee. In March 1988, the Holy Family Parish Council, led by Irene Miranda, unanimously vetoed Fr. Spine's decision to tear down the church, and in May the parish council unanimously voted him out of office. "This vote had no practical effect," wrote Fr. Lane, "but the action did make the front page of the *Chicago Sun-Times*."

Fr. Lane was living in the Holy Family rectory at that time and working at Loyola Press, where he is now director. "I did not think the church should be torn down if there was any way to save it," he said. In June 1988, the Jesuit provincial superior, Fr. Robert Wild, approved Fr. Lane's work with the congregation to save the church.

The Holy Family Preservation Society incorporated that fall, chose an architect, and named a development director. In summer 1990, Fr. Wild informed Fr. Lane and the parishioners the Preservation Society had to raise \$1 million in cash by Dec. 31, 1990, or the money would be returned and the church demolished.

Fr. Lane and a board member, Dick Barry, decided to try Fr. Damen's strategy to save the church by holding a prayer vigil from Dec. 26 to 31. Their plea, "Say prayers and send money," headlined Chicago newspapers and was picked up on the Associated Press wire, spreading the message worldwide through *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, WGN News, and CNN.

Donations poured in, but the church fell short of its goal. So on Sunday, Dec. 30, Holy Family opened to the public and between noon and 5 p.m. some 2,000 to 3,000 people came to see the church. "Each one had a story," Fr. Lane recalled, "'My grandparents were married here,' 'I was baptized here.' And each one had a check or a cash donation. By the midnight deadline, a total of \$1,011,000 had been received. The people had saved their big old church through the intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help."

By summer 2003, the Holy Family Preservation Society had raised \$5 million and was able to restore the church to its original beauty.

An architectural landmark restored

Holy Family Church is known nationally as one of the best examples of Victorian gothic architecture in the country, with its clerestory windows (the oldest stained glass windows in the city) and its pipe organ, built in 1870 by Louis Mitchell & Son Co. of Montreal. Obtained in 1870, the acoustically perfect organ has 64 stops and 23,944 pipes and is considered one of the musical masterpieces of its day.

The church also keeps 29 wooden statues forming an angelic orchestra; they constitute the world's largest collection of work by 19th century Montreal sculptor Charles Oliver Dauphin. The final public showing of these rare hand-carved gilded angels has been extended to early 2008; visitors will have their last chance to see the angels up close at the Christmas concert at 5 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 6, and at the Sesquicentennial Mass at 9:45 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 7. Then the angel orchestra will return to its place atop the massive two-story organ case.



Steve Swanson

Sam Parker has served as director of the Holy Family Parish choir since 1973. Here he displays one of the 29 wooden statues comprising an angelic orchestra that have adorned the church's two-story organ case.

The newly constructed parish center, adjacent to the church's west side, will be dedicated in 2008 and serve as a parish and community center for gatherings and activities.

New challenges

Today, Holy Family faces another dramatic change as new housing developments and an influx of new residents transform the church's neighborhood.

Fr. Boland, who has served as part-time administrator at Holy Family for five years (in addition to his other role as the Archbishop's delegate for extern and international priests), frequently refers to the parish as "one of Chicago's oldest churches and one of its newest parishes." Shortly after he started at Holy Family, a baby started crying loudly one Sunday during a still moment in the Mass and "the entire congregation burst into applause," Fr. Boland said, underscoring the people's appreciation for new life in the parish after a long absence. Afterward, the young mother approached Fr. Boland and observed, "At other churches I get mean looks when my baby cries—here, I get applause!"

One of Holy Family's longest standing affiliations is with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), who came in 1867 and still work in the parish today, making it the BVM's longest relationship. Five BVM sisters serve the parish and surrounding neighborhood, including supporting people as they move from public housing and tutoring in Smith Public School. They also run the Holy Family Food Pantry and the West Side Employment Agency.

Sr. Marion Murphy, BVM, has served at Holy Family since August 1995. "Working with people in the whole neighborhood community, you see the same resiliency and faith of persons of all varied faiths who have suffered through difficult times with economics and housing. You can see their positive view of life and see that faith is a major factor in that positive view.

“I don’t know that our resiliency is the main thing to state about us now,” she went on. “As everything changes in the neighborhood, it changes in the parish. We have to keep the resiliency to face that challenge, to continue being the inclusive community that we have been and are today.”



Steve Swanson

The splendor of Holy Family is not lost as parishioners and friends reflect on the church’s 150th anniversary.

Said Odell Gordon, parish council president, “In the beginning, the parish was all German, then Italian, then it became African American with Hispanic. We see that changing again; the neighborhood is more upper-income to middle-income. But we still have a nucleus of African-Americans who don’t live in the neighborhood—we’re a commuter parish.”

Gordon was vice president of the parish council and has been president since 2003. A parish member since 1976, he attended Holy Family Grade School, which closed in the 1980s. He represents a large group of parishioners who grew up in the neighborhood, moved out, but return each week for Mass and volunteering. “We have a history of togetherness,” he said. “The people who have been here the last ten, 15, 20 years, they play the key roles as far as getting things done.”

One such family is the Caninos, ten children who grew up across the street from the church. Five attended Holy Family School. “Growing up, it was everything to us,” recalled Max Canino. He now lives in the west suburbs but returns for parish events and Sunday Mass every week, as do several of his siblings. “It’s my family,” he said. “Even though you go away from it, you have to come back—you have strength with your family.”

The sense of family and commitment has kept the parish strong throughout shifting leadership. Until Fr. Boland became administrator five years ago, the parish had had a series of temporary pastors. “We knew they would only be here a limited time,” explained Gordon. “As parishioners, we took it upon ourselves to get things done. That has developed into parishioner leadership.”

That leadership is particularly visible in the gospel choir, directed by Sam Parker.

“The choir has been instrumental in keeping people who have seen the changes,” said Gordon. “When they were going to close the church, there were choir members standing and singing on the steps in winter. They helped save the church.”

Parker was recruited to develop and direct the Holy Family choir in 1973 by the Rev. Frank Holland, who recognized the need for a gospel choir in the predominantly African-American church. Parker, an accomplished soloist and director, accepted, and a handful of parishioners volunteered to sing. “The original members didn’t really have training,” Parker said. “From those who could sing to those who were tone deaf—you name it, I took them and I trained them.”

More than three decades later, the Holy Family gospel choir is as ethnically diverse as the parish, with members’ ages ranging from five to 75 and coming from all over the Chicago area. The choir has traveled throughout the Midwest to perform its original music, scored by Parker.

On Sunday, Nov. 25, the Holy Family gospel choir celebrates its 34th anniversary with a free concert for the public, beginning at 6 p.m.

“The most joy I get is from seeing people come together, especially if they felt they had nothing else to offer,” Parker shared. “If they can sing God’s praises, if they can learn to do that, and do that well, I’m doing my job. I’m fulfilling that spiritual side of me to share with others.”

Every Sunday during the sign of peace, which sometimes lasts 15 minutes, the choir wraps it up when Parker sits at the organ and begins to play and parishioners resume their places, a little lighter, a little more jubilant, no doubt feeling the joy that comes from belonging to such a welcoming community.

Holy Family Parish is located at 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd. For more information, call (312) 492-8442 or visit www.holyfamilychicago.org/.