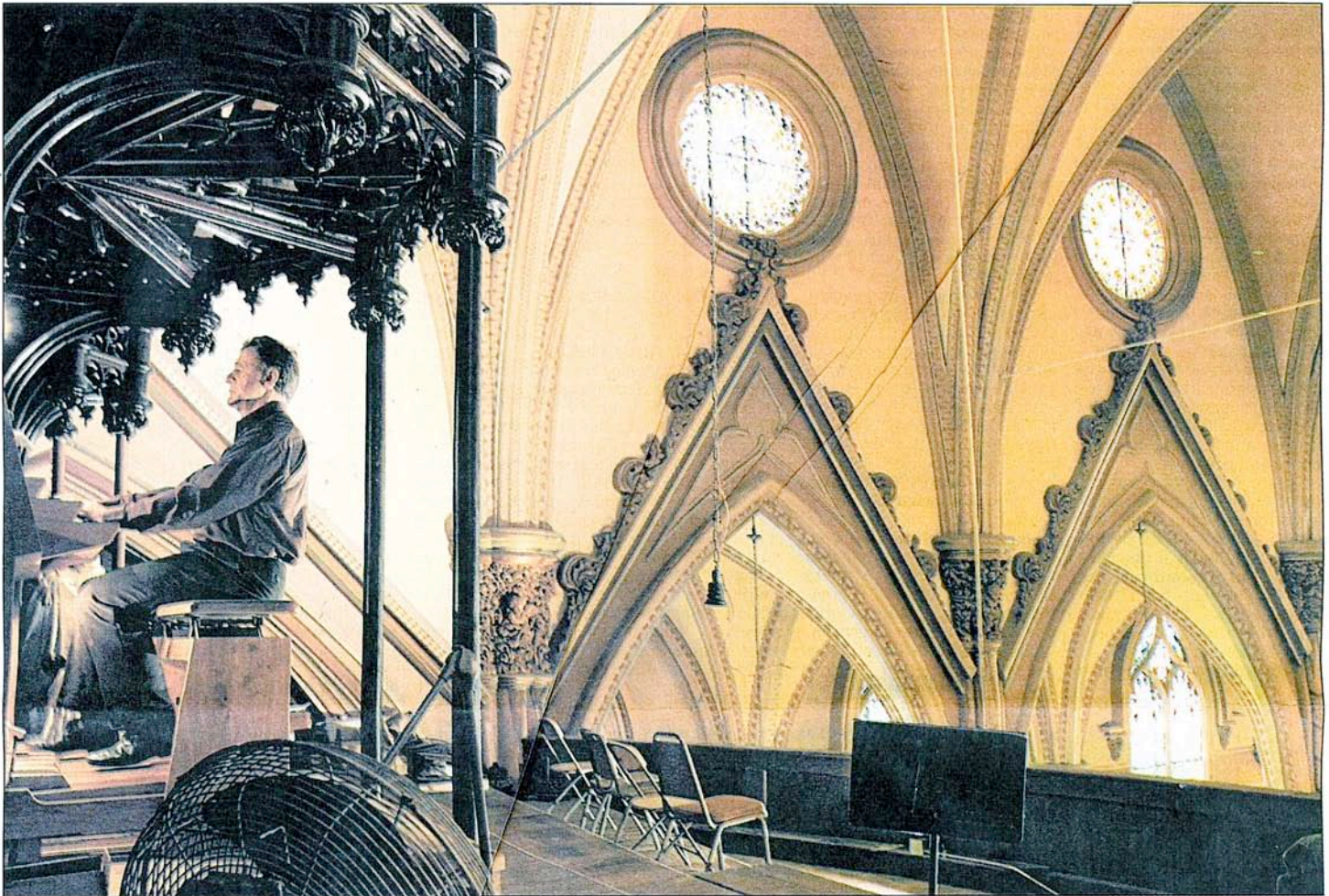


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METRO



Tribune photos by Chris Walker

Gregory Kuklewicz plays the new pipe organ in Holy Family Catholic Church, 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd., Chicago. Its 150th anniversary will be celebrated Sunday.

Holy Family to turn 150

Church survived 1871 Chicago Fire, disrepair and a 2003 blaze—and Mrs. O’Leary’s relatives help celebrate its storied history and growing importance to city

By James Janega
Tribune staff reporter

The family wasn’t comfortable there in the public gaze, not after all the kicking around they’d gotten for being related to Mrs. O’Leary, she of the infamous cow.

But they came to Holy Family Catholic Church on Thursday, smiling awkwardly at attention avoided for generations, out of devotion to the parish of their ancestors.

On Sunday, Holy Family will celebrate its 150th anniversary, having survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and other assorted calamities. Church leaders have spent the year renewing connections to the past it shares with Chicago.

Among those links is the O’Leary family, the Irish immigrants and one-time parishioners whose cow, the story goes, started the Chicago Fire by kicking over a lantern a few blocks from Holy Family.

“It’s come a long way,” said John Lester Neeson, 82, looking at the church.

A great-grandson of Catherine O’Leary, the retired South Side carpenter was invited to Holy Family on Thursday with his family as a way of linking the church’s long and turbulent past with its hopeful present.

Chicagoans love their history, and parish leaders have sought for years to tie Holy Family’s survival to the city’s primal identity of disaster and rebirth, of immigration, of showmanship and clout.

Holy Family survived the 1871 fire thanks to prayer and a strong west wind, fought neglect in 1990 with six-fig-



John Lester Neeson, 82, the great-grandson of the O’Learys, visits the family’s old church Thursday.

PLEASE SEE CHURCH, PAGE 6



Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Rev. George Lane tours Holy Family Church on Thursday as it prepares for its 150th anniversary. In the attic, he looks at a window with John Comiskey's name.

CHURCH: Candles still burn for 1871 aid

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ure donations from the city's biggest institutions and \$20 bills from poor families, and bounced back from a basement blaze in 2003.

Its parishioners have represented the changing face of Chicago, encompassing waves of Irish, Italians and African-Americans. It has ridden the crest of Roman Catholic participation in city life and weathered declines that have shuttered other urban parishes.

The church survived on a mixture of "determination, faith and prayer—and connections," said Rev. Jeremiah J. Boland, administrator of the church.

More than once, it has fallen

Cardinal to say mass in Holy Family Sunday

Cardinal Francis George will say mass in honor of Holy Family Catholic Church's 150th anniversary at 9:45 a.m. Sunday in the church, 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd.

An open house will follow from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., at which a restored historic processional banner dating to 1861 will be displayed, along with a collection of hand-carved gilded wooden angel statues dating to the 1870s and a collection of chalices, gold monstrances, candlesticks and church vestments brought from Paris in 1863.

back on publicity stunts.

When asked about the importance of showmanship—such as producing long-silent descendants of the O'Learys—Rev. George Lane, one of the church's most successful fundraisers, smiled.

"It does help focus attention," Lane said.

Neeson and his sister Rosemary Kopfman, 80, are the great-grandchildren of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary, Irish immigrants from County Kerry. The Holy Family registry shows that Neeson's grandfather, James, was baptized at the church in 1863 and attended the parish school. A great-uncle Cornelius was baptized there in

1860, one of the first in the parish, which was founded in 1857.

Neeson and his wife, Doris, brought a family album brimming with old newspaper headlines blaming relatives for burning down the city—a story the family has lived with for more than a century.

"Legends never die. They have a spurious immortality," begins a page snipped from Stephen Longstreet's history "Chicago." Though the cow has been exonerated, the family name has been tarnished anyway.

"Unfairly and unjustly," Boland said.

Holy Family was founded by Rev. Arnold Damen, a Dutch Jesuit priest who built the

structure where one of America's fastest-growing cities met the muddy edge of a prairie.

His plan to save his young church from the Chicago Fire involved fervent prayers to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and a promise to light candles in her honor if she interceded. The candles still burn in the east transept.

By 1990, the church was threatened again, having become decrepit enough that the parish needed to raise \$1 million by midnight New Year's Eve to save it from the wrecking ball. Lane organized an around-the-clock prayer vigil with the slogan "Say Prayers and Send Money." When the clock struck midnight, supporters had raised \$1,011,000.

Four years ago a fire broke out in the church basement. Though firefighters from the station across the street put out the flames in minutes, an insurance company spent millions of dollars and several months to fix damage from smoke that filled the building.

When the workers were done, things were better than before—better than the renovators had

planned.

"That was the most successful fire anyone ever had," Lane said.

No one knew how the fire started, though a few suspected arson.

"It's a mystery," Lane insists.

Having survived lean years, Holy Family is now positioned to ride new growth in the neighborhood. The church's steeple, still the tallest thing for blocks, now rises above shuttered public housing, expensive town houses and the fresh red bricks of construction at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

There were 375 families registered at the church at the beginning of 2007, a small number as Chicago parishes go. Still, there were more baptisms at Holy Family in the last year than in the previous four, Boland said, and parishioners are driving across the city for services.

After all these years, the city somehow feels invested in Holy Family's survival, he guessed.

"It became an effort that all of Chicago got involved in," Boland said. "This became part of our collective history." jjqnega@tribune.com