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Tribune photos by Chris Walker

SOUL OF THE CITY

Like Chicago, Holy Family has never given up

By Maureen Callahan

Strength. Vitality. Heroism. When asked to capture Chicago's get-up-and-go-on attitude in 1891, a local writer used those words to describe the city.

Yet this "I will" spirit had already been in place for 34 years at Holy Family Catholic Church. And those of us touched by the West Side parish will be forgiven for wondering whether the Chicago spirit originated there.

Founded in 1857 by Jesuit Rev. Arnold Damen (for whom Damen Avenue is named), Holy Family celebrated its 150th jubilee on Dec. 30. Despite a century and a half of hard knocks—the Great Fire of 1871, several economic depressions and, more recently, profound population shifts—the bell tower that reaches 236 feet into the air has stood as a beacon of hope for generations of Chicagoans.

Holy Family rose up from the nickels and dimes contributed by poor Irish immigrants. It long served as the cornerstone for five neighborhood Catholic schools. And more recently, it has stood as a sign of pride and an anchor for the revitalization of a blighted urban landscape.

Come what may, the church, like the city it stands in, has persevered.

So, from an unabashed devotee of Holy Family, here is an invitation to peek through the city's oldest remaining stained-glass windows and revisit the spirit of this true Chicago icon:

Sit in the last row of the original oak pews, reserved for members of the city's oldest firehouse, Engine Co. 18, across Roosevelt Road. These pews are closest to the doors in case of an emergency.

Listen to the melodic Frobenius pipe organ, which contains pipes that may have been part of an organ played by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Walk the 110-foot aisle that so many parishioners traversed on Sundays and landmark days, for uncounted masses and tens of thousands of weddings, christenings and funerals.

Note the black walnut communion rail as you approach the elaborately carved 52-foot-high altar; it is one of only a few left in the city.

Appreciate the European influence in the handiwork of the craftsmen who carved the replica of Da Vinci's "Last Supper" into the altar table.

Reflect on the methodical talent of Chicago's first registered architect, John Mills van Osdel, and the detail of the country's best example of Vic-

torian Gothic architecture.

About 20 years ago, church officials announced they were going to close Holy Family, once the largest English-speaking parish in the United States, and tear down the church.

But the Holy Family Preservation Society raised \$1 million to stave off the wrecking ball, overcoming perhaps the biggest obstacle the church had ever faced.

The challenges keep coming. A fire in the basement tested the church's limited resources in 2003. But then, this is a place that survived the Great Chicago Fire. Holy Family found a way to do what it always has done: succeed.

Chicago is a national example of strength, hard work and perseverance. It is a place that, when rebuilt out of the ashes of disaster, emerged twice as strong. For a century and a half, the hardworking people of this city have passed through the heavy oak doors of Holy Family and called this great fortress their own.

Even more than its history, art and architecture, Holy Family reflects Chicago with its heart, hope, courage and determination.

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