



HISTORIC • ILLINOIS

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency • Division of Preservation Services • Vol. 26 • No. 5 • February 2004



Chicago's "European Cathedral"

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Holy Family Church, located on Roosevelt Road in Chicago, is the second oldest church in the city. Constructed in 1857, the church survived destruction three times in its 146-year history.

Inset: Shown here are three of the twenty-six wooden angels that were hand-carved in 1870 by Charles Olivier Dauphine of Montreal. (Photos courtesy Holy Family Church)



The Miracle on Roosevelt Road

Chicago's Holy Family Church

The second oldest church in Chicago, Holy Family Church has survived certain destruction three times in its 146-year history, earning it the name "The Miracle on Roosevelt Road." A wind shift, thought by believers to be the result of the founding pastor's fervent prayer, saved the building in 1871 during the Great Chicago Fire. In the early 1990s, the church was rescued from the wrecking ball by the tenacious efforts of parishioners. And in the summer of 2003, firefighters used infrared technology to track a fast-moving basement fire, extinguishing the blaze just minutes before it reached the vast expanse of the sanctuary above. Firefighters say the church would have been destroyed within minutes if not for thermal imagers.

Holy Family Church is an important part of the history of Catholicism in Chicago. Father Arnold Damen, a well-known Jesuit priest who came to America in 1837, founded Holy Family Church in 1857. The Victorian Gothic-style church, built on what was then the outskirts of the city, was described as "a European cathedral on the Illinois prairie." Begun in the midst of a financial panic, and built with the nickel and



Restoration of the steeple was just one component of a decade-long rehabilitation effort funded by the Holy Family Preservation Society. (Photo courtesy Holy Family Church)

dime contributions of the faithful poor, the structure became a powerful symbol of Catholic faith in the city of Chicago. John Van Osdel, Chicago's first registered architect, designed the interior, which includes ribbed vaults and majestic arches. The twelve stained-glass clerestory windows, made

by the W. H. Carse Company of Chicago in 1860, are the oldest in the city. Also remarkable is the elaborately carved wood created by German immigrants. Holy Family was the third-largest church in America when it was dedicated in 1860. The addition of a 236-foot tower in 1874 made it the city's tallest structure.

Under Father Damen's leadership, a comprehensive school system was established at the parish, beginning with the Holy Family Free School for Girls, which opened in 1857. His dream of establishing an institution of higher learning was realized in 1870 with the opening of St. Ignatius College, now St. Ignatius College Prep, a structure that still stands adjacent to the church, and that today boasts an enrollment of approximately 1,300 students.

By the 1890s, Holy Family had grown to be the largest English-speaking congregation in the country, with more than 25,000 members. The majority of early church members were Irish, and it is said that one-third of the Irish Americans now living in the Chicago area have their roots in Holy Family parish. Membership of the church shifted over the years to Italians, then

Hispanics, and more recently to African-Americans. Church literature explains the empowering effect of the church: "Each nationality group has gone 'up and on and out,' inspired and enabled by the majesty of the building, the strength of the sacraments, the school system, and the ministry of the priests and sisters of Holy Family parish."

All of the buildings of the Holy Family parish complex survived the Great Chicago Fire of October 8 and 9, 1871, which began just six blocks away in a barn belonging to Patrick and Catherine O'Leary, who were members of the parish. Father Damen was in Brooklyn when the fire started. Father George Lane, president of Loyola Press and leader of the Holy Family Preservation Society, described Father Damen's reaction to receiving the news via telegraph that the church was in peril: "He prayed all night to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, promising that if the church were spared, he would have seven candles lit forever in front of her statue in the east wing. The wind shifted, and the church was saved. . . . To this day, those candles are still lit in front of the statue." Whatever the reason for the wind shift, the church was spared from the devastation that destroyed many Chicago landmarks. The solidly built structure continued to house parishioners for more

than a century, but by the mid 1980s Holy Family Church had fallen into disrepair, and the inner-city congregation numbered only 250. The main sanctuary was closed in 1984 because

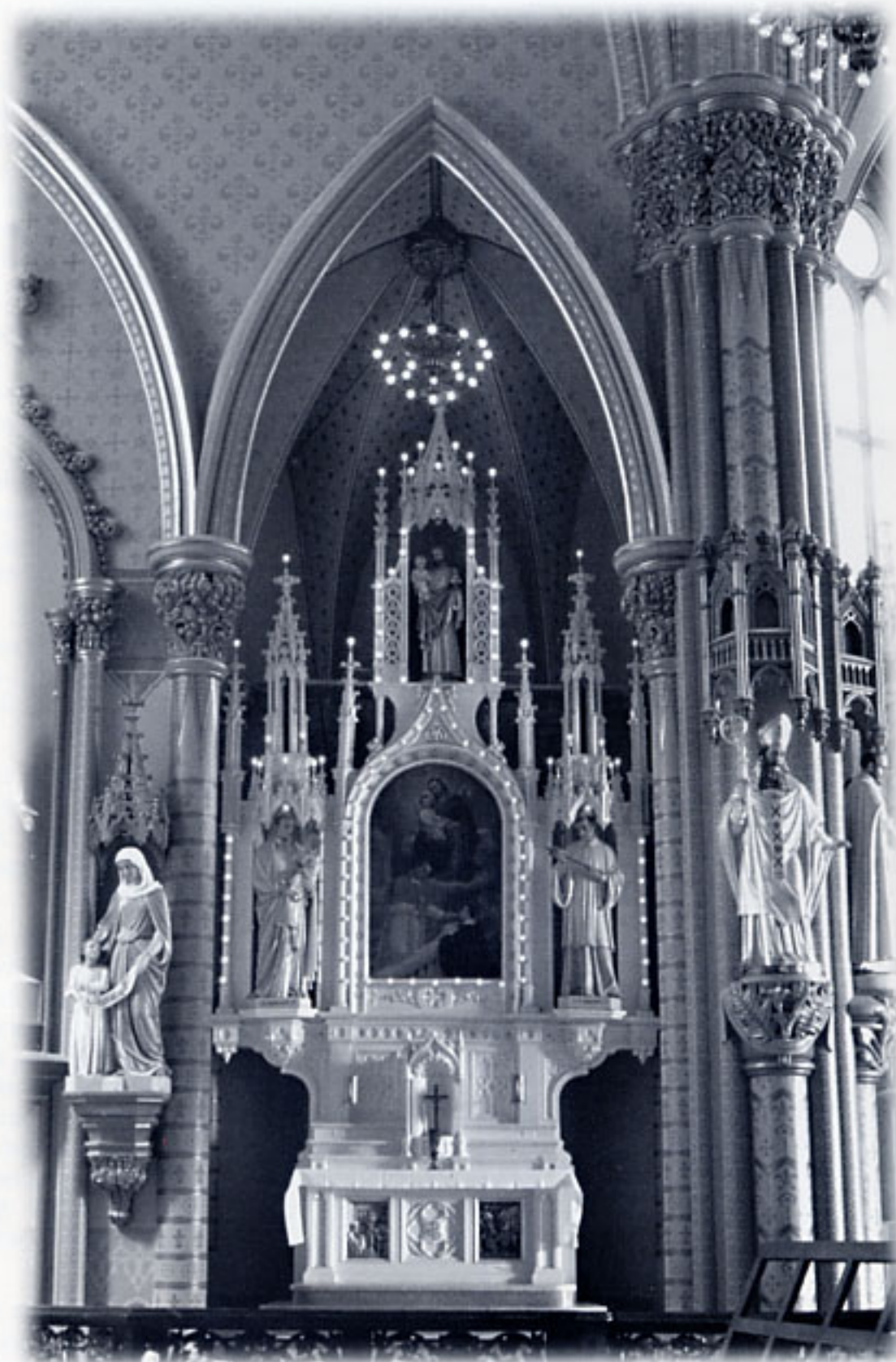
the edict. Parishioners were given an opportunity to save the church, if they could raise the necessary money.

The Holy Family Preservation Society was incorporated in Illinois in October 1988 to lead the fundraising effort. Within the first year and a half, the group raised \$700,000. But in the summer of 1990, the society was told that it needed to have \$1 million cash in the bank by December 31, 1990, or the donations would have to be returned and the church demolished. In early December, the society remained \$300,000 short of the goal, with only three weeks left to collect the seemingly insurmountable sum.

Richard Barry, president of Public Communications, Inc. (PCI), in Chicago, set up a public relations strategy to raise the remaining amount before the New Year's Eve deadline. What ensued during the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve of 1990 was a public relations campaign of international proportions.

Father Lane explained the communications strategy. "We went back to the history of Father Damen. . . . We told the story of how Our Lady of Perpetual Help saved the church in 1871, and we

announced that the people of the congregation would hold a prayer vigil at 5 P.M., on the front steps of the church, with seven candles and a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. On December 26 and every night for a week, several dozen parishioners of



The main altar consists of thirteen carved wooden angels placed among the elaborately carved fifty-two-foot-wide altar. (Photo courtesy Holy Family Church)

of the danger of falling plaster, and parishioners congregated in the chapel for worship. When plans were announced in 1987 to tear the church down and replace it with a smaller, cost-effective building, the Holy Family Parish Council fiercely fought

the church prayed on the front steps of the church in the cold snowy weather. There to greet us were Channels 2, 5, 7 and 9—all the big [Chicago] TV stations—along with the radio stations and newspapers. They were all there. The media was looking for a religious ‘good news’ story.”

Major newspapers also picked up the story, leading with Father Lane’s motto, “Say prayers and send money.” The *New York Times* and *USA Today* carried feature articles with large headlines and pictures about the vigil, and CNN broadcast the story throughout the world.

By Thursday, December 27, Father Lane and Dick Barry determined that they would need to make a dramatic move to raise the remainder of funds needed to rescue the building. “Dick asked me if we could open the church,” Father Lane said. “So I called the insurance company and asked. The inspector came the next morning and told us if we cordoned off the main aisle, we could have an open house.”

On Sunday, December 30, the Feast Day of the Holy Family, Holy Family Church was opened to the public for the first time in six years. With the help of prominent exposure in the media, the event brought in between two and three thousand people. Father Lane explained the effect of the open house. “The church was cold and dark. We had a basket near the front of the church,” he said. “Each person who came brought a story about a family member who had been baptized, confirmed, or married in the church. By the evening, we had so much money in the rectory that we asked the police to stand guard with us overnight. The next morning, the Northern Trust Bank sent three people to count the money. By the Monday midnight deadline, we had \$1,011,000. On January 1, we

announced that the ‘little people’ had saved the big, old church.”

In an editorial, the *Chicago Tribune* dubbed the triumphant one-week effort, “The Miracle on Roosevelt Road,” words that have been used ever since to describe the church. Restoration began in the spring of 1991, and over the next decade, the Holy Family Preservation Society raised \$3.7 million more to restore the church to its original Victorian Gothic splendor.

Once again, the “cathedral on the prairie” was spared destruction. And, once again the church was nearly lost. This time, it was the Chicago Fire

Department that came to its rescue.

At about 7:30 A.M., Friday, July 25, 2003, Father Lane was driving west on Roosevelt Road when he came upon more than a dozen fire trucks in front of Holy Family Church. In a frame of mind he describes as “in shock,” he stopped to see what was happening.

Just a half-hour earlier, a passerby had noticed smoke coming from the basement, and she ran across the street to the local firehouse to make a report. Flames were already shooting out of the cracks in the doors on the lower level when fire-

fighters arrived. They pried open the door into the burning food pantry, doused the flames, and brought in a thermal imager to begin tracking the fire. Battalion Chief Tedd Korbos commanded the scene.

“We knocked the fire down, then used the [thermal imaging] camera on the walls and ceiling,” he said. “The second room had a corrugated tin ceiling, and it took three or four guys to pull each section apart with pike poles. The camera showed us exactly where to pull . . . we knew just where the fire was in the walls and ceiling. So it saved us a lot of time.”

Chief Korbos says the fire traveled

The steeple was wrapped in scaffolding during its restoration in 2001. (Photo courtesy Holy Family Church)





The Chicago Fire Department responded quickly to the fire at Holy Family Church. Pictured here, left to right, are firefighter John Knightly, Lt. Jack McKee, firefighter Art Jansky, and firefighter Dan Voris. (Photo courtesy Holy Family Church)

along the pipe chase through the ceiling and into three downstairs rooms. A team on the main floor of the church used another thermal imager to trace the fire and help the team below apply water in the right locations. Their combined efforts stopped the quick-moving blaze directly under one of the historic wooden confessionals, just before the fire reached the bell tower.

"If the fire had reached the bell tower, we would have lost the whole church in a couple more minutes, I'm sure of it," Chief Korbos explained. "There are many hidden void spots all over the church, after years of renovations, and we would have been guessing about where the fire was traveling. With the old dry wood, the church was like a tinderbox."

Father Jeremiah Boland, administrator of Holy Family, provided his perspective of the near loss of the church. "The thermal imagers focused like a laser right on the area that was on fire, and it made all the difference in the world," he explained. "This church is all wood, and it was a hot, dry part of the summer. We were

all set for a major disaster.

Firefighters say that we would have lost the building within another five to eight minutes. Nothing was destroyed in the upper church. . . . This church has the oldest stained glass in Chicago, and not one pane of glass was broken in their effort to get the fire under control. . . . I didn't know anything about thermal imaging technology before this happened," he said. "And I learned after the fire that the track record of old churches that survive basement fires is almost nil, because by the time a fire is discovered, it usually has already traveled up the walls to the church. With the vast expanse of space, the fire quickly gets out of control," he said.

Holy Family Church leaders have longstanding relationships with fire department personnel of the 130-year-old Engine Co. 18 located across the street. Once a month, Holy Family holds a citywide mass for firefighters, and on Memorial Day, the church holds a mass for fallen firefighters. In honor of the role that Engine Co. 18 played in saving the church last summer, the parish re-ded-

icated the "Firefighter's Corner" on December 28. Three pews are now reserved for firefighters to worship during their shifts.

The Chicago Fire Department was equipped with thermal imagers in the spring of 2003. Funded by a personal donation of \$1.2 million from Bank One Chairman Jamie Dimon, the fire department purchased 120 imagers, one for every firehouse in the city.

Holy Family Church, three times rescued from disaster, now serves a new generation and a new population of people who are moving into new housing all around the neighborhood. Father Lane notes that new people join the congregation every Sunday. "We are saving the past to serve the future," he says.

Rebecca Scholer

Rebecca Scholer is manager of public relations, media relations, and fundraising for the company that produced the thermal imaging devices used by Chicago firefighters. Scholer is a graduate of Ball State University, and she received her MBA from Indiana University.

Restoration of Holy Family Church is Ongoing

The Holy Family Preservation Society is now accepting contributions to fund a sprinkler system for the basement and a laser-alarm smoke and fire detector in the sanctuary, to prevent a recurrence of the July 25 near-disaster.

Holy Family Preservation Society is a not-for-profit 501-(c)-3 corporation. All gifts are tax deductible.

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