

Chicago Tribune

A CHURCH THAT ALMOST DIED MOVES CLOSER TO A NEW LIFE

Jack Houston CHICAGO TRIBUNE December 8, 1989

The heavy, weather-beaten doors of Holy Family Catholic Church on the Near West Side swung open briefly Wednesday to receive a gaggle of parish schoolchildren, parishioners and church leaders.

Once inside, the little flock clogged toward a brilliantly lit high altar, then huddled shoulder to shoulder on creaky wood pews against the sanctuary's dank chill.

They had come to witness an important announcement about their beloved, 130-year-old church building, which had been closed to worshipers in 1984 and, until last year, was the proposed target of a wrecker's ball.

Standing before a battery of reporters while flanked by members of the Holy Family Preservation Society, Rev. Robert Wild, local provincial of the Society of Jesus, said the Jesuits would pledge \$750,000 toward a \$1 million maintenance fund, once the \$3 million church restoration goal was met.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit preservation group's development director, Constance Mortell, announced that the Cuneo Foundation, which earlier had pledged \$25,000 toward restoration and repair of the church roof, had increased its gift to \$100,000.

No one cheered. No one applauded. But most everyone smiled.

"Once the necessary funds are raised, we commit ourselves to the restoration of Holy Family Church so the church can once again become a sign of hope and the Lord`s presence to the people of the immediate neighborhood," said Father Wild. "We join enthusiastically with others who are interested in saving this venerable and important building."

Holy Family parish was founded in 1857 by Irish immigrants who had come to Chicago and settled on what was then the outskirts of the city. The common brick building, completed in 1860, is one of the city`s few buildings still standing that survived the 1871 Chicago Fire.

Located at 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd., the gothic-style structure is surrounded today by the ABLA public housing complex and the campuses of St. Ignatius College Prep High School, the West Side Medical Center and the University of Illinois-Chicago. Despite this diversity, most of the 250 parishioners are poor.

Two years ago, then-pastor Rev. William Spine told the parishioners he did not believe they were capable of raising enough money to save the old church. He insisted it was better to tear it down and replace it with a smaller, less expensive structure. The Jesuits had pledged \$1 million, half to be spent on tearing down the building and the rest to build a cheaper structure.

But the people of the parish asked to be given a grace period to raise the funds. They said that if they could have more time, an anonymous donor had promised to repair and maintain the building while the congregation raised funds for the full restoration. The unnamed donor never came through, but Father Wild granted the congregation`s request in July of last year.

Although the church is structurally sound, falling plaster and an unrepaired roof have forced it to be locked shut. Worship services are held in a smaller structure behind the main altar.

Campaigns to save significant but decaying churches in Chicago have not been successful. A dozen Catholic churches have been torn down in the last two decades. The city has no preservation plan and no general study of the situation. Meanwhile, the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago is reluctant to help preserve churches that sit half-empty in the inner-city`s poor neighborhoods. Father Wild said that if the \$4 million goal is not reached by the end of next year, "We`ll have to look at demolition."