

Chicago's Holy Family Church Celebrates 160 Years of Resilience

August 11, 2017 — Chicago's first Jesuit parish and second oldest church is celebrating 160 years. Founded by Jesuit Father Arnold Damen in 1857, the church has survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, a planned demolition in 1990 and many changes in its west side neighborhood.



An anniversary Mass was held last month, with Fr. Brian Paulson, SJ, provincial of the Midwest Jesuits, and Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner among the hundreds in attendance.



Jesuit Father Brian Paulson, provincial of the Midwest Jesuits, at the 160th anniversary Mass.

During the Chicago Fire, the church appeared to be in the path of the blaze that destroyed roughly three-square miles of the city and left 100,000 homeless. Fr. Damen, on a mission trip in Brooklyn, asked Our Lady of Perpetual Help to save the building, promising to light seven candles before her statue if the church was spared. The wind shifted, the church was spared and the candles were lit. Seven electric lights continue to burn around the clock at the shrine to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the east transept of Holy Family Church.

An interesting historical footnote: The O'Leary Family, owners of the cow blamed for starting the fire (whose cause never was determined) were parishioners.

In 1987, the Jesuits decided to demolish the church and build a smaller one, but Jesuit Father George Lane, pastor at the time, received permission from his provincial to work with parishioners to save the church.



Jesuit Father George Lane, celebrating a Mass in Holy Family Church, was instrumental in creating the Holy Family Preservation Society, which raised millions of dollars for repairs and restoration.

Fr. Lane started the Holy Family Preservation Society with the goal of raising \$1 million by the end of 1990 to keep the church open. On Dec. 30, 1990, the feast of the Holy Family, the church held an open house attended by more than 2,000 people. Local and national media picked up the story of the candlelight vigil held on the church's steps over the next two nights, and news spread of Holy Family's need. By the deadline, the church had collected \$1.011 million, and although it still needed more than \$5 million for renovations — which it eventually raised — the church was saved.

Known for its Victorian Gothic architecture and craftsmanship, hundreds of incandescent lightbulbs around the altar light a magnificent vaulted ceiling, and stained-glass windows bearing scenes of the Nativity and the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, cover the walls.

While the church is no longer run by the Jesuits, there is still a close connection, as it continues to serve the spiritual needs of Jesuit-run Saint Ignatius College Prep next door, including Mass and retreats.

Lifelong parishioner John King spoke of the profound sense of community at Holy Family Church: "You won't find anything like this. I've been a parishioner since I was a boy, and I'll keep fighting for this church." [Sources: [Chicago Tribune](#), [WGN](#), [Gazette Chicago](#)]

