

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago's Holy Family Church, saved from demolition 25 years ago, prays on

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Rev. Damen's vestments

Vestments worn by the Rev. Arnold Damen, Holy Family's first pastor, in 1860. During the last week of 1990, Holy Family parishioners scrambled in a last-ditch effort to save their church from demolition by the Jesuits unless \$1 million cash was in hand by Dec. 31. Twenty-five years later, parishioners will show their gratitude. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

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Ellen Skerrett looked up at the tall white wooden altar of Holy Family Church and remembered when it was almost destroyed.

"People that see the church today think it's unimaginable that this place came this close to demolition," she said, gesturing with her thumb and index finger.

Today the historic church at 1080 W. Roosevelt Road, one of five public buildings that survived the Chicago Fire in 1871, is beautiful. The high ceilings and patterned walls are illuminated by hundreds of incandescent light bulbs at the altar. More than 300 people sit in the old wooden pews each Sunday morning Mass, watched over by statues of Jesuit saints clad in white and gold robes.

This year, 94 couples have married at the church, more than half alumni of St. Ignatius College Prep High School next door.

But just 25 years ago, Holy Family was crumbling and parishioners worshiped in a crowded back room of the church. With a then-shrinking congregation and falling roof, the building's owners, the Jesuits of Chicago, were set to demolish the structure to build a smaller one. A church where generations of immigrants worshipped would be gone forever.

Parishioners needed to raise \$1 million cash to save the church. The Rev. George Lane, a now-retired priest who was at Holy Family then, spent years collecting donations but was \$300,000 short by December 1990. The money was due at the end of the month. They needed a miracle.

On Dec. 26, 1990, parishioners began a five-night vigil on the church's front steps in a last-ditch effort. Skerrett, a historian and longtime parishioner, remembered the cold of the church on those days.

"Even in its darkest state, you could see the beauty of the place," she said. Thousands of Americans sent money. Some sent coin collections with notes attached that said, "Father, don't let them tear down the church." A stockbroker in North Carolina who had seen the story on TV wrote Holy Family a check for \$10,000. Even an attorney for Oprah Winfrey called to say she would pay what money the church couldn't. Winfrey later gave a check for \$50,000.

On the final day, more than 2,000 people came to the church, and Chicagoans banged on the front door with cash in hand until sunrise. Holy Family had received so much money that it called the Chicago Police Department to guard the rectory. Lane had \$235,000 in a basket under his bed.

On New Year's Day he announced from the church steps that \$1,011,000 had been raised.

Since 1991, volunteers have mostly restored Holy Family, but the Rev. Michael Gabriel said there is still work to do. Plaster falls from the ceiling, and long, splintered cracks run up the walls in an unfinished room upstairs. Old shirts are stuffed into any broken stained-glass windows. The basement routinely floods from a western wall of the church. The altar is loose from the wall. The church needs \$300,000 to finish repairs.

Gabriel, who has been at Holy Family for two years, still finds crosses or pieces of intricately carved wood parts in closets and on balconies. Figuring out where they go can take weeks.

"It's a living process," he said. "To keep a place like this going for the future is an immense challenge."

With 25,000 parishioners in the 1880s, Holy Family once had the largest English-speaking congregation of any church in the United States, Skerrett said. The Rev. Arnold Damen, the namesake of Damen Avenue, founded the church in the Irish immigrant shantytowns west of the Chicago River. When the Irish moved out, the Italians moved in. As the neighborhood changed, the church became mostly black and Hispanic.

Gabriel said the congregation today is diverse and multiethnic, and the church draws people from all over the Chicago metropolitan area.

"Every group that has come here has a great ownership of the church," he said. "When I have atheists and agnostics come, even they say they feel a presence here."

Skerrett said at Holy Family she feels a sense of all the people who came before. "It's hard to do that in Chicago," she said. "I'm interested in the quotidian, the everyday, and this place has never stopped functioning."

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