

Chicago Tribune

# Fire helps rekindle tradition

**Christopher Steiner, Tribune staff reporter** CHICAGO TRIBUNE December 25, 2003

About 120 years ago, Holy Family Church on the Near West Side reserved its back pews for firemen from the station across the street so they could rush out of mass at the sound of the fire bell.

That tradition, lost to history, will be revived Sunday, when the parish dedicates its last pew to the firefighters and paramedics who have served on the other side of Roosevelt Road since 1873. The firehouse is the oldest active one in the city.

Misfortune recently rekindled the storied relationship between local firefighters and the venerable church, built in 1857.

Holy Family, 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd., the second oldest church in Chicago, next to Old St. Pat's, cheated certain destruction on July 25, when firefighters from nearby Engine Co. 18 doused an intense fire that began in the church basement.

Fire officials said the blaze would have engulfed the building if not for the keen eye of a passerby who alerted the firehouse, which had double its normal staff on hand due to a change of shift.

"If not for so many of our guys being across the street, we would be standing in a parking lot right now," said Bill Kugelman, grand knight of St. Florians, an arm of the Knights of Columbus made up of firefighters.

Kugelman received a call when the fire was discovered and raced to the Catholic church to help.

The flames largely were contained to the basement, but the old building essentially would have been tinder had the fire been discovered any later.

Smoke damaged several rooms of the church, including the bell tower, which for about 15 years was the tallest structure in the city until the Monadnock Building was built in 1890.

The tower's bells will be rung Sunday for the first time since the fire.

This was the second time the church dodged a charring catastrophe. In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire swept through most of the city, leaving only a handful of buildings standing. Holy Family was one of them, despite being just blocks from the fire's purported starting point.

Because the arching space of a large church can serve as a chimney, "basement fires in churches are almost impossible to stop," said Rev. Jeremiah Boland, administrator of Holy Family.

If firefighters hadn't been so close by, "this place would have gone right up," Boland said.

The fire was another bump in the road toward total restoration for the church, which was rescued from demolition in the 1990s when parishioners and donors came up with almost \$5 million.

"Little by little," Boland said, "we're making it."

Inside the 1,000-seat church, its age is obvious. Intricate detail dots most of the interior and 146-year-old columns continue to shoulder the load of the ornate ceiling.

Confessional booths carved from wood line the rear of the church, though one stands away from the others, having been damaged by the fire and moved so repairs could be made to the floor and wall.

Masses continue on schedule for the most part. That includes the monthly mass held by the [Chicago Fire Department](#), usually attended by about 200 firefighters.

The averted fire disaster adds more lore to what has been a 120-year relationship between the church and firefighters.

"We kind of adopted them, and they adopted us," Kugelman said.