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HOLY FAMILY CHURCH AT A CROSSROAD

Ellen Skerrett CHICAGO TRIBUNE December 20, 1990

Time is running out for Holy Family, the Gothic church that has anchored Chicago's Near West Side for 130 years.

To stave off the wrecking ball, parishioners and the Holy Family Preservation Society launched a \$3 million fund-raising campaign. They have collected nearly \$700,000 but need \$300,000 more by Dec. 31. If this goal is not met, the Society of Jesus has indicated it will raze the church and close Holy Family parish.

Unlike many of the diocesan churches and schools that were closed this summer, Holy Family's future is bright. In recent years, the Near West Side has experienced a rebirth, thanks in large part to its location near the Loop and the expansion of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The demolition of Holy Family Church would be a tragedy under any circumstances. But its destruction now-when nearby St. Ignatius College Prep and the surrounding neighborhood are flourishing-is unthinkable. The paradox is that St. Ignatius College Prep has been lovingly restored to its 1870 grandeur, at a cost of \$9 million, while its mother institution, Holy Family Church, stands shuttered next door.

For generations of Chicagoans, Holy Family Church and St. Ignatius have been twin landmarks on Roosevelt Road, visible signs of the Jesuit mission to inspire and educate. But the Jesuits now insist that the church and school are quite separate institutions. The distinction would have astonished their founder, Rev. Arnold Damen. When he began organizing Holy Family parish on the prairie in 1857, the first priority was a permanent house of worship. Begun in the midst of a financial panic, Holy Family was a symbol of faith and hope in the future.

Built with the nickels and dimes of immigrants, Holy Family Church offered incontrovertible proof that Catholics were creating a place for themselves in the city. The genius of the American Catholic experience, embodied in Holy Family parish, was its equal support of church and school. In Father Damen's day, advertisements for St. Ignatius emphasized the relationship between church and school. Current promotional literature for St. Ignatius does not mention Holy Family. This is curious indeed, because for more than a century, the school's masses, assemblies and commencements were all held in Holy Family Church. Holy Family and St. Ignatius have been linked spiritually, historically, aesthetically and physically; they even share a heating plant.

Jesuit support for the restoration of Holy Family Church has taken the form of a \$750,000 pledge earmarked for a church maintenance fund. But this pledge will be fulfilled only if the Holy Family Preservation Society meets the financial goal and timetable set by the Jesuit Province.

All Chicago will be poorer if Holy Family's walls come tumbling down. Through the carved wooden doors of this church have come wave after wave of immigrants, first the Irish and Germans, then Italians, and later Mexicans and African-Americans. Although ethnic and racial transitions were sometimes painful and difficult, each group in turn claimed the church as its own.

Over the years, Holy Family Church has inspired thousands of people in its struggle to achieve self-respect and dignity in a largely hostile society. This

mission continues today and the present parishioners have made it clear that their church is an essential symbol of that tradition.