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Holy Family, church that has withstood many challenges, celebrates 160 years

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160 years

Sister Marion Murphy, center, spent 20 years of her career at Holy Family Church and is greeted at the church's 160th birthday celebration on July 16, 2017. (Nancy Stone / Chicago Tribune)

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Robert Nolan is among the generations of parishioners who call Holy Family on the Near West Side home.

Nolan's family has attended Mass at the Roman Catholic Church since it was founded on the outskirts of the city in 1857. He said his ancestors, Timothy and Ellen Peters Nolan, were founding parishioners of the church in the mid-1800s, and records show their daughter, Mary Ann, was one of the first congregants baptized at the church.

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"This place has so much history," said Nolan, 68.

On Sunday, the parish's 160th anniversary was celebrated in the gilded Victorian sanctuary. Gov. Bruce Rauner was among the hundreds who filled the church's worn wooden pews.

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"The Mass was beautiful," Nolan said. "At one point, I almost broke down in tears because I started thinking of my father."

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Since its founding, Holy Family has managed to escape the Chicago Fire of 1871, a planned demolition in 1990 and decades of social and political upheaval.

Ellen Skerrett, Chicago historian and parishioner at Holy Family, said when the church was founded, the Irish Catholics who made up the bulk of its congregation were not seen as a "well-to-do" people.

"This was a time when the Irish were considered to be a threat to the city of Chicago," Skerrett said. "A time when critics thought what they really needed were jails, not places of beauty."

A Chicago Tribune editorial from May 25, 1857, begged community members to think twice before donating to the Jesuit church, "not in the spirit of intolerance, but upon the warrant of facts which show that the Society of Jesus is the most virulent and relentless enemy of the Protestant faith and Democratic government."

But Skerrett said Catholic parishioners came together and built the church in three years.

"They were revising those stereotypes," she said.

After Sunday's Mass, John King sat in a pew as the rest of the congregation filed out of the church. He has a crop of bouncy, salt-and-pepper hair and somber blue eyes. He wore his Sunday best for the occasion: a gray, windowpane suit with a pocket square to boot.

King, 81, said he would like to have seen more parishioners at the anniversary celebration, and he is worried the church will lose its sense of camaraderie as fewer people attend Mass.

"But that's what we are all about," King said. "Hugs and kisses and knowing who the parishioners are."

During the Great Migration, African-Americans began moving into the neighborhoods around Holy Family but were segregated in St. Joseph's Mission near the corner of 13th and Loomis streets. It wasn't until the 1950s that black Catholics began celebrating Mass at Holy Family.

King said his mother worked as a minister, and he can remember her ironing the special red cloth for the altar.

When she died in 1987, her funeral was held in a crowded back room of the church.

At the time, Holy Family was crumbling. The roof of the church was falling, and the congregation was shrinking. The building's owners, the Jesuits of Chicago, were set to demolish the structure.

"It was decaying out here," King said, looking up at the ceiling.