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HOLY FAMILY DODGES RUIN TO GLITTER ANEW

Phat X. Chiem, Tribune Staff Writer CHICAGO TRIBUNE December 28, 1998

As a young altar boy, Frank Dioguardi would peer up into the Victorian Gothic interior of Holy Family Catholic Church on Chicago's Near West Side and stand awestruck at its grandeur.

On Sunday afternoon, some 60 years later, the retired engineer paid a visit to his childhood church and was equally overwhelmed at the result of more than \$4 million in renovations to the Civil War-era edifice.

Having survived the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, the threat of the wrecking ball in 1990 and recent years of lackluster membership, the 138-year-old church is going through a breathtaking renaissance. On Sunday, as Catholics observed the Feast of the Holy Family, the church opened its massive wooden doors to celebrate the final phase of its renovation.

And along with local residents and tourists, many former parishioners showed up to witness firsthand the rebirth of a church that was weeks away from demolition eight years ago. That's when a group of dedicated churchgoers raised more than \$1 million in a two-year campaign to save the Chicago landmark at 1080 W. Roosevelt Rd.

"This church was my life," said Dioguardi, 71, who contributed money to the campaign. "I grew up here and had my first communion here. It's so wonderful to see the original look of the church, with all the colors and the saints."

Dioguardi recalled that as a child he feared the darkness of the intricate confessional booths that were created in 1873 by Sebastian Boucher, a German immigrant. Boucher's uncle, Anthony, carved the church's main altar, comprising 52 feet of elaborate wood carvings and 13 sculptured statues.

To longtime parishioners, Holy Family's survival has been nothing short of a miracle. In 1984, a rotting roof and crumbling plaster forced the Chicago Province Society of Jesus, which owns the church, to condemn the building and announce plans to raze it.

But a fierce group of parishioners, going against even their own pastor, formed the Holy Family Preservation Society to raise money for a massive renovation. Eventually, more than \$4 million poured into the church's coffers, including a contribution from a man who gave his life savings in coins.

"It was the little people saving their big church, against all odds," said Rev. George A. Lane, who led the restoration effort. "I think the finger of God is here."

The money has paid for a new slate roof, tuckpointing, cleaned drainage systems, restored stained-glass windows and a new community service center. The century-old grime has been lifted from many of the church's 150 statues and magnificent oil paintings.

In this latest phase, artisans created replicas of Holy Family's turn-of-the-century chandeliers using photographs from 1900. They also restored the east and west transepts, and the ceilings above the side aisles. Church officials said

the restoration is about 90 percent complete, with more work to be done on the stained-glass windows and the balconies.

The renovation brings Holy Family back to its former glory, when founding pastor Rev. Arnold Damen--as in Damen Avenue--built the huge church on a desolate prairie with the nickels and dimes of the area's Irish and German immigrants. The congregation eventually grew to more than 20,000 members, making it the largest in the nation for a time. Today, the membership is at 200, but church officials said the neighborhood around Holy Family is coming back and so should the parishioners.

Over the decades, the church has embraced not only the Irish and the Germans, but Italian, Hispanic and African-American families.

"This church was a way for the poor and the working class to proclaim their identity and really establish their place in the city," said Ellen Skerrett, a Chicago historian. "This is the real Chicago in many ways."

On Sunday, as a Music of the Baroque string ensemble filled the sanctuary with sweet strains, many families came back for a reunion of sorts.

"I was crying outside before I came in," said Dolores Leone Norris, who was baptized and married in Holy Family. "The renovation is just wonderful."

Also present on Sunday was Mary Joan Collins Barry, whose great-grandfather was one of the original parishioners from Ireland and whose grandson was recently baptized at the church. "It's been a magnificent miracle with the help from all types of people," said Barry.