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Author
Joyce Verrette
steps into
her own
fantasy

Rev. Thomas L. Brown, Administrator
Sacred Heart Shrine
11652 S. Church St.
Chicago, IL 60643

Jan. 18, 1979

Dear Father Brown,

I have reviewed the history and problems involving the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, both as they pertain to the Shrine itself and to the problem of personnel in the Archdiocese. It is evident from the history of the Shrine that when it was established in 1904-05 it was to provide for the needs of French speaking people in the far South of Chicago. Over the years, of course, these people have moved away and their places have been taken by people of the many neighboring parishes who are not truly parishioners of the Shrine, but have their own proper parishes according to Canon Law.

I am well aware that many of them have a sentimental attachment to the Shrine because of the small size of the congregation and the architecture of the building. However, there is the fact that St. Walter Parish, as most of the parishes of the Archdiocese, is understaffed and finds great difficulty in providing Masses at two locations. I also understand that Father Kret, O.S.A., has been assigned new duties by his Provincial and can no longer assist at Sacred Heart. Father Gallagher has been most generous in traveling from the North Side, but he, too, in justice, must take care of his own assigned duties. There is further pressing need to establish new parishes in many areas of the Archdiocese to take care of the spiritual needs of the thousands of Catholics who find themselves at great distances from a Catholic Parish. I therefore, feel an urgent need to try to answer these needs.

In addition, there are building problems, which is the need for a new roof and improper exits from the second floor. There are many violations of existing Building Code provisions which should be corrected. Hence, in my own best judgement and after discussion with the Archdiocesan Consultors, it seems prudent to merge this congregation with the already existing parishes in the neighborhood.

I ask you, therefore, to advise those who have frequented this Church that Mass will not be celebrated there after January 21st, since the building is not suitable for worship purposes. Since most of those now attending Sacred Heart are already canonical parishioners, (Canons 92 and 94), in one of the nearby territorial parishes, there will be no difficulty or inconvenience for them to attend their own proper parish.

With the hope and prayer that all will understand the serious reasons which have prompted this decision of the Board of Archdiocesan Consultors and myself, I extend to all my blessing and greeting, praying that we will have the fullest cooperation from all in discontinuing the use of this Church, I am,*

Very gratefully yours in Christ,

+ *John Cardinal Cody*
Archbishop of Chicago

The People of Sacred Heart vs. the Catholic Archdiocese

by Mary Mulligan and Bill Nigut

Taught never to doubt the wisdom of God or Church, the people of Sacred Heart found themselves pitted against their own Archbishop.

"Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst."

— Matthew 18, verse 20

It was snowing. Again. By this Sunday morning in late winter, no one needed any more snow. Tons of it had already clogged the streets, wreaked havoc on the city's economy, and given Chicagoans a collective headache so severe they would soon topple a mayor and threaten a political institution.

And now it was snowing on the parishioners of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart Mission as they stood in a broad, open field next to their church at 117th and Church Streets on the city's far South Side. But this snowfall seemed soft and gentle as it drifted down onto shoulders and bare heads. It fell quietly, wrapping itself like a protective blanket around the 200 or so people who had gathered once again to pray and protest over the closing of their 107-year-old church by the archdiocese of Chicago.

The setting seemed so pastoral, the parishioners so mild of demeanor, that a casual observer might fail to understand that these Catholics — who had been taught all their lives that one never doubts the wisdom of God or the Church — had gathered here to continue their battle with the spiritual leader of their community, John Cardinal Cody, Archbishop of Chicago.

As this article goes to press, the Catholic archdiocese of Chicago and members of Sacred Heart Church are meeting to talk out their dispute over the fate of Sacred Heart. Whatever the outcome of that meeting, this story is an account of what it took for one group of Catholics just to be heard by their spiritual leaders.

They had been assembling in this field every Sunday morning since January 21, when Father Thomas Brown had announced to parishioners at the noon mass that they were attending the last service ever to be held at Sacred Heart. Because there was a shortage of priests, Sacred Heart's recently retired pastor would not be replaced; the archdiocese was unwilling to pay for building repairs needed to bring the church up to code; and there were a number of other parishes in the vicinity of Sacred

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Heart that could easily absorb the parishioners here. For those reasons, the Cardinal had decided that Sacred Heart, a church rich in Chicago history and touched by strange legends of miracle-healing, was to be demolished. When they heard the announcement, the parishioners of Sacred Heart booted.

The booting was the first indication that members of Sacred Heart were not going to let their church die without a fight. But while they might hope to save Sacred Heart from demolition, they were about to plunge into a mire of archdiocesan politics and

bureaucracy that would leave many of them disillusioned and embittered over what one parishioner called "Unchristian behavior by the Catholic Church."

In the days immediately following Father Brown's announcement, parishioners formed the Committee to Save Our Shrine and began mapping out a plan of action. The plan was simple. Letters and phone calls would be directed to the Cardinal to make him aware of just how much Sacred Heart meant to its people. Telegrams would be sent to the Pope asking for his assistance. Because some parishioners had heard rumors the church would be demolished within the first week after its announced closing, the Committee posted a 24-hour guard around Sacred Heart. No one really knew what the guards would have done had the bulldozers arrived.

Members of the committee to Save Our Shrine felt they could present a strong argument for saving the church. They quickly gathered enough financial pledges to assure payment for necessary building repairs; and they found a priest who wanted to be assigned to Sacred Heart. Since he was unassigned at the time, no other parish would be affected by his move.

But as they organized their efforts, one overriding question gnawed at the Sacred Heart parishioners: Why would the Cardinal close a church which was completely self-sustaining; which never asked the archdiocese for financial aid, but for years had contributed substantially to the Church's

*The text of Cardinal Cody's letter appeared in the St. Cajetan Sunday bulletin on January 28, one week after the announced closing of Sacred Heart stirred anger among people in the area. The letter represents the Cardinal's only public comment on the Sacred Heart matter.

According to one Vatican spokesperson, "it's impossible" that Cardinal Cody would not agree to talk out the problems of Sacred Heart with its parishioners. CHICAGOLAND MONTHLY contacted the Vatican to learn whether Rome had taken a position on the controversy. The spokesperson we reached hadn't heard about the closing, but reacted sharply when we explained that the parishioners had tried repeatedly to gain an audience, even by telephone with the Cardinal. "An Archbishop who doesn't talk to his people?" came the surprised reply, "Don't say that! It's impossible...impossible!"

coffers? And why close a church at which attendance was booming? Masses at Sacred Heart had become so popular in recent years that additional pews had to be installed in a lower level of the church and two masses offered simultaneously to accommodate all the worshippers. In a time when attendance at other churches was dwindling and few parishes could survive without financial aid from the archdiocese, why was the Cardinal closing down a church which had more than enough parishioners and money? Many Sacred Heart members believed the Cardinal had simply

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made a mistake which he would correct when he came to understand the facts.

But in the first week of February, Sacred Heart member Fran Kiraly received a disturbing letter from Monsignor Francis Bracken, a top aide to the Cardinal, who made it clear just where Sacred Heart stood. The letter was not a response to the pleas to keep Sacred Heart open, but rather the final word from the archdiocese on a matter the people of Sacred Heart had tried to bring to the Cardinal's attention months earlier.

In August, 1978, Sacred Heart parishioners had petitioned the archdiocese to name a replacement for their recently retired pastor. Five months later, the petition remained unanswered. And so, on the day after she learned the church was to be demolished, Fran Kiraly vented her anger and frustration by writing the Cardinal a letter expressing her disappointment that the archdiocese had "never even had the courtesy to respond to our petition."

A few days later, the letter from Msgr. Bracken arrived. Kiraly read it in shock.



Sister Aquin: Her father donated the farmland on which Sacred Heart stands. She wants urgently to save the church.

"You seem not to understand that according to Canon Law there are no parishioners at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart," the Monsignor said, in reference to the fact that under Church law there is a specific difference between parish churches and mission churches. "Hence, we could not respond to parishioners who do not exist."

The letter infuriated Sacred Heart members. They were getting nowhere in their attempts to reach Cardinal Cody or any of his top aides, and the Monsignor's terse reply to Kiraly further dampened their hopes for a friendly hearing from the archdiocese.

"The archdiocese is like a black veil to us," said Sacred Heart parishioner Mary Angona. "Who do you call if you have a complaint? There's a mystique, like a secret society."

None of the people fighting to save Sacred Heart wanted a confrontation with the archdiocese. But slowly and hesitantly the parishioners began moving towards more direct action.

Jack Simmerling is a soft-spoken South Side art dealer who attended Sacred Heart for 25 years. When he learned the church was to close, he let his youngest daughter make an impromptu First Communion at Sacred Heart's final mass. He expressed the concerns many fellow parishioners shared over becoming more militant:

"We're certainly not radicals. I think we're trying to say we feel so strongly about this (church). We were a very quiet people over the years. Everything was kept at a very low key here...maybe that was a mistake."

But on Sunday, February 4, two weeks after Sacred Heart was officially closed, the parishioners found themselves with no choice but to take a firmer stand. On that

day, during one of their now-weekly gatherings in the field by the church, they learned that the archdiocese had finally obtained a wrecking permit and would order Sacred Heart demolished the next day. The Cardinal clearly had no intention of listening to the parishioners' grievance.

On February 5, the people of Sacred Heart dug in to do battle with the archdiocese of Chicago and its Archbishop, John Cardinal Cody. The Committee to Save Our Shrine filed suit in Circuit Court asking that the archdiocese be enjoined from demolishing Sacred Heart and that custody of the church be given to the parishioners. The people of the church were prepared to assume full responsibility for upkeep and repair of the building, and for making Sacred Heart a functioning Catholic church once more.

What's more, the parishioners asked that the archdiocese give an accounting of the money Sacred Heart members had given the archdiocese over the years. Those contributions, the parishioners reasoned, should have been applied to building repairs.

The Committee was asking for an extraordinary ruling. Sacred Heart was archdiocesan property; moreover, there was some question whether the Court had jurisdiction in what might essentially be considered the internal affairs of the archdiocese.

Nevertheless, Judge Joseph Wosik granted the parishioners a 30-day continuance, saving the church, for the time being, from the wrecking ball. A small victory had been won.

It was a victory which probably did not please Father George Schomberg, pastor of nearby St. Cajetan's parish.

Father Schomberg had actively lobbied against Sacred Heart for some time before it closed. It was from his parish that most of the "converts" to Sacred Heart had come, and he was reportedly concerned about the drain on church collections. On Palm Sunday, 1978, he wrote of his concerns about Sacred Heart in a Sunday bulletin to his parishioners:

"I am optimistic about solving our financial problems as a parish. My conversation with other pastors in our area...indicate that they face the same rate of increase in their parishes...everyone except Sacred Heart which is supported by area people and does 'zilch' for the community except run a 'quick stop service' (a reference to the shorter masses often offered at Sacred Heart). But I guess there has to be 'a pebble in everyone's shoe' as a constant reminder to do penance and be mortified.

"Anyway, our people will with God's help, do what is necessary. We'll keep you informed about our progress."

Throughout the month of February, hundreds of Sacred Heart parishioners continued to meet each Sunday in the field adjoining the church. They now had keys to the building, and could have met inside to avoid the bitter cold which greeted them on several mornings. But few wanted to go inside. The church was in shambles. Pews had

been torn out, the altar removed, statuary hauled away. According to several parishioners, Father Brown, named as administrator of Sacred Heart by the archdiocese, had sold artifacts from the church in the weeks after it was closed. "At first, he let us take out a few things we wanted to keep in storage," said one parishioner. "But then he began selling pews, statues, and other things."

"I asked Father Brown if I could have the stained-glass windows to keep them safe," said a Sacred Heart Member. "I offered to pay him a fair price, which seemed like the right thing to do. He agreed I could have the windows."

"A week later he told me he wanted to sell them to a North Side antique dealer who had made him a better offer." Parishioners saw little chance of recovering many of the items which had been sold.

With the interior of their church torn apart, the parishioners preferred to stand in the field, where a flat-bed truck had been brought in for use as a raised stage. They held services that were half prayer, half pep-talk. They plotted their next moves, and speculated on how the Cardinal must feel about them, for he still had not broken his stony silence.

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Few parishioners believed that the Cardinal was aware of the special significance the church held for its members. But its history, and unique pastors inspired a deep emotional attachment for the many who worshipped there.

Sacred Heart Church was originally founded in 1902 to minister to the needs of French immigrants who had settled on the far South Side. For 10 years the church served the handful of residents in the area from a small wood-frame building constructed in a swamp near the Purlington Brick Yard. But in 1912, Sacred Heart acquired a pastor who was to draw worshippers from areas far beyond the church's tiny jurisdiction.

Father Raymond DeNorus, a former missionary with the Cree Indians in Alberta, Canada, is a legendary figure to the people of Sacred Heart. DeNorus is said to have been a faith healer and practitioner of folk medicine who cured hundreds of the sick and crippled during his 23 years as pastor of Sacred Heart.

"He used to stand at the side entrance to his quarters at the rear of the church and



Paul Palmer

distribute holy water, medicines, and blessings to the sick who came to the church," says a history of Sacred Heart commissioned by its members. Over the years, those DeNorus treated left behind crutches, canes, braces and eyeglasses, which lined the walls of the church up to the day it was closed. Plaques bearing the image of the Sacred Heart and inscribed with the names of people who had been healed lined the church's rafters. Over the years, Sacred Heart, which was now known as a shrine, became the site of pilgrimages for people from all areas of the midwest. And because of the special feelings many had for the church, Sacred Heart became the recipient of an extraordinary collection of oil paintings, statuary, carvings and stained glass windows.

Father DeNorus is remembered as the man who infused the church with a sense of caring and energy which still exists among Sacred Heart parishioners today.

Mary Angona: "It's very hard to explain what makes Sacred Heart so special. When you go there it's simple. Basic. The people make it special. When you go through the doors it's like God touches you. You are reminded that somebody watches over you."

32-year-old Paul Palmer, a theology teacher in a Chicago Catholic girls' school, attended Sacred Heart from the time he was a small boy "Sacred Heart is like a small country church," he said. "It's small, old and beautiful. A building is just a building, but Sacred Heart is special."

When the archdiocese closed Sacred Heart, Palmer, who in the past few years had been attending mass there only infrequently, came back to organize the Committee to Save Our Shrine. It was Palmer — whose description of himself as a "portly, scraggly Abraham Lincoln" isn't far from the truth — who had been leading the protest-prayer sessions every Sunday.

Palmer believes that his opposition to the archdiocese in this fight could cost him his job. He says that a parish priest has questioned girls who are in Palmer's classes to learn if Palmer "always teaches the subver-

sion of the Catholic Church."

Others who support the parishioners are equally nervous about how the archdiocese might react. "We know of any number of priests who have told us confidentially that they are on our side," said one member of Sacred Heart. "They say they're sorry they can't speak out, but they're afraid of the Cardinal."

Fearful or not, the parishioners of Sacred Heart proceeded with their suit to keep the church from being demolished. On March 9, they returned to Judge Wosik's courtroom, ready to present their case. Judge Wosik, however, made it clear he would prefer to see the matter settled out of court, warning the Sacred Heart members they would probably lose if the case were tried on its merits.

"In my experience," the Judge told attorneys for Sacred Heart and the archdiocese, "there is not enough communication in the courts between lawyers, clients and clerks. Maybe the same is true in religion." Wosik asked the archdiocesan attorney, James Seritella, to prevail upon the Cardinal to send "someone (in the archdiocese) with authority" to talk with the Sacred Heart parishioners.

"If these people are nice enough to come here, and Catholicism means this much to them, certainly (the Cardinal) can take some time for them," the Judge concluded.

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To allow time for the proposed meeting, Judge Wosik continued the case for another two weeks.

One week later, the archdiocese finally responded. At the time of this writing, the Committee to Save Our Shrine is scheduled to meet with a representative of the Cardinal "empowered to make a decision based on the facts as he sees them." The Cardinal is not expected to attend the meeting.

Several landmark commissions are currently deciding whether or not to grant landmark status to Sacred Heart. But even if the building is preserved, the people of Sacred Heart must have the Cardinal's approval to continue as a church. And they would rather have a church and not simply a landmark. For as Paul Palmer said, "a building is just a building, but Sacred Heart is special."

Special enough that even as the snows thawed, hundreds of parishioners were continuing to meet every Sunday in the South Side field, praying, sharing stories, and hoping that the church next door might soon be reopened. They are ready to go back inside.