

IN OUR KEEPING  
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"On the Frontlines in Chicago"  
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to the very edge of the city and beyond. My hope is that in taking a closer look at the parishes where Dominican Sisters and priests and brothers served we will have a renewed appreciation for their life on the frontlines, first as pioneers in Protestant-dominated strongholds, and later as religious who stayed put in racially changing neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. The historical record shows otherwise. No other denomination in the city invested as heavily as the Catholic Church in creating educational institutions that extended from the downtown business district to the very edge of the city and beyond. My hope is that in t

News reporters quickly put the blame for the fire on Catherine O'Leary and her cow, creating perhaps America's first urban legend. In recounting his search for the O'Leary home, a *New York Daily Tribune* correspondent drew on accepted stereotypes of Irish Catholic women as poverty-stricken superstitious hags, declaring that: "There was no shabbier hut in Chicago nor in Tipperary." And that was just for starters. He informed his readers that the O'Leary house bore a curse as powerful as any in Greek mythology and predicted, correctly, that: "Mrs. O'Leary is in for it, and make no mistake. Fame has seized her and appropriated her name, barn, cows, and all." Catherine O'Leary was in fact a successful Chicago businesswoman whose earnings had helped to buy property on DeKoven Street and she was a respected member of Holy Family parish. After being demonized as "Our Lady of the Lamp," Mrs. O'Leary fled to the South Side with her family and refused to answer the door when reporters came knocking every year on the anniversary of the fire.

Skilled German labor had helped to build the brick and limestone stores and hotels in Chicago's business district that vanished in the fire of 1871. This scene depicts the horror as fire spread downtown. While it is clear that women and the elderly are being carried to safety, the sinister-looking figure in the foreground wearing a top hat has no time to help.

institutions, but St. Jarlath was anything but. Could we make such glib assessments if we knew more about the day-to-day life of the Sinsinawa Dominicans in the 1880s and 1890s? After they were creating a parochial school that met the needs and aspirations of Irish-American children whose feet were already planted on the rungs of the ladder of upward mobility. When it comes to understanding parishes such as St. Jarlath there are more questions than answers. In light of the Sisters' well-deserved reputation for art and music, isn't it likely that the children of Protestant neighbors also found their way to the convent on Hermitage Avenue? How did the Sisters respond to the challenges of teaching Puerto Rican students in the 1950s and, finally, what was it like to watch the church and school being demolished in 1969?

One of the most enduring stereotypes Irish Catholics confronted was that of Bridget the domestic. Although generally depicted on the stage as a figure of fun, cartoons such as this reinforced the idea that Irish immigrant women tyrannized households and made life difficult for their middle-class and well-to-do Protestant employers. Here Bridget, wearing a shamrock dress, threatens the woman of the house with a well-muscled arm.

studio, to design a modern church at 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Kimbark Avenue. Its unusual terra cotta exterior sent a powerful signal that Hyde Park's Catholics were determined to put their imprint on the urban landscape.

Barry Byrne's design for St. Thomas the Apostle was a radical departure from Catholic church architecture of his day and it anticipated liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Parishioners enjoyed an unobstructed view of the main altar as well as stati

Every time I look at this photo I wonder what was it like to teach in a school where your duties included organizing May Crownings on the Boulevard, a tradition begun by Msgr. Daniel Byrnes on Mother's Day in 1939 that flourished through the 1950s.

Children who grew up in Vis remember in vivid detail what it was like to march along the boulevard or participate in the annual St. Patrick's Day productions, but these events would never have occurred without the labor of Dominican Sisters or their own



gathering of lay people and clergy was a massive show of Catholic strength during a period of American history marked by nativism, anti-immigration legislation, and anti



While parish development in the nineteenth century tended to be haphazard, all that changed during the administration of Archbishop George Mundelein, who took care to ensure that Catholic churches would be located near major streets and accessible by public transportation. St. Sabina, founded in 1916, is a classic example of the "mile-square" parishes that came to be such a distinguishing feature of Chicago in the twentieth century. The Sinsinawa Dominicans began teaching school in September 1917 in a combination building but before long plans were underway for a monumental Tudor Gothic edifice.

Parishioners may have lived in modest bungalows and two-flats, but they sought to create a sacred space that was a place of great beauty, in their lives and in their neighborhood. Even after the Depression struck, there

Beginning in 1910, Sinsinawa Dominicans welcomed children to the red-brick three-story structure known as Epiphany on 25<sup>th</sup> Street, just west of Keeler Avenue. Not only did the building blend in well with neighborhood homes, but it was an eminently practical model of parish development with space for classrooms as well as worship.

Cardinal George's parents were married at Epiphany on August 10, 1929, just weeks before the stock market crash.

While the Georges moved first to Austin and then to the Northwest Side in St. Pascal's, Epiphany parish soldiered on, weathering the Depression and World War II, meeting the needs of Polish-American and Slovak-American families.

One of the astonishing things about the Catholic Church in Chicago is its sheer persistence. At the time when urban planners were predicting the demise of cities in the 1950s, Epiphany parishioners invested in a permanent house of worship. Some might argue that this was money poorly spent but I believe a compelling

The Dominican commitment endures.

presentation today will begin a conversation about the need to document this fascinating story—in detail. Understanding the particular places in which Dominicans lived and the neighborhoods they encountered can only deepen our appreciation of the investment they made day in and day out in their classrooms and convent communities. Thank you.