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Push to preserve Notre Dame Church in Worcester stirs mixed emotions

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WORCESTER - Whether or not preservationists are successful in saving the remains of Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, some would say the building's soul departed long ago.



Only 70 of the faithful attended the [final Mass at Notre Dame](#) on June 29, 2008, when plaster was already crumbling from interior walls and the cathedral-like mother church of the city's Franco-Americans was one of three Catholic parishes in Worcester closed for good on that Sunday.

Ten times that number of people were on hand for the Romanesque landmark's dedication on Sept. 15, 1929, when the bishop of Springfield sealed a time capsule containing copies of the daily Telegram, the Evening Gazette, and parish historical documents in the church's cornerstone before celebrating a pontifical high Mass at the ornate high altar in the sanctuary.

"WILL BLESS WALLS," read the headline in that morning's Sunday Telegram. The church was to be placed "in the service of God, to whose glory it is dedicated," the paper wrote.

The high altar had been saved from the first Notre Dame Church, gutted in a fire that razed the block along what is now Franklin Street 20 years before, according to the newspaper accounts. Also rescued from the flames was an oil painting of the Crucifixion that hung above the altar.

In 1974, during a modernizing trend following the reformist Second Vatican Council, the venerable high altar, with its turrets and statuary alcoves, was dismantled and replaced with a marble table in a theater-in-the-round setting. In a photo taken during the renovation, the once eye-catching sanctuary looks stripped and vacant.

The oil painting of the Crucifixion, meanwhile, was moved to a shrine at the back of the church. Today the painting, a revered heirloom of the city's French Catholic heritage, hangs in the sacristy of St. Joseph's Church on Grafton Hill, where 6,000 French Canadian immigrant families once lived and where Masses now are said in French for the city's Haitian newcomers.

Notre Dame des Canadiens, after its shuttering, was relegated to non-sacred status and sold by the [Worcester Diocese in 2010](#) for \$875,000 to the developers of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project, amid which the vacant church now stands like a white elephant, hemmed in by the construction of upscale apartments and a hotel.

Stations of the cross depicting Christ's journey to Calvary also had been saved from the 1908 fire. Last year, on a tour of the interior of the former Notre Dame Church, one of the stations, showing Christ shouldering his cross, could be seen crumbled on the floor.

On Wednesday evening, [preservationists are expected to pack a Planning Board hearing](#) on a developer's proposal to demolish Notre Dame and replace it with 84 luxury apartments.

Those campaigning to save the church propose alternative uses for the soaring structure encompassing thousands of square feet in the middle of CitySquare: an entertainment venue perhaps, or a public market.

But the idea of saving and converting the church that has lost its original reason for being stirs mixed feelings.

"My French-Canadian immigrant ancestors would have preferred that their church be torn down rather than turned into a nightclub, a pub or a restaurant," said the Rev. Steven M. LaBaire, pastor of Holy Family Parish at St. Joseph's Church.

"(Given) the sacrifices they made so that it could be a worthy house of worship, (it) would not make sense to them," Rev. LaBaire said. "From what I remember about the faith of my great-grandparents and grandparents, that would be unfathomable to them."

Rev. LaBaire continued: "If there were another vocation for the building, given the fact that times have changed - if there were a way to save the structure in some kind of worthy way that would serve the community as a museum or a library or a monument to Worcester heritage, that at least would be a compromise."

Marc DeMille, a member of the St. John's Schola Cantorum that sings every Sunday at the 7:15 p.m. Mass at St. John's Church on Temple Street in Worcester, also is parish music director at the strikingly restored St. John the Evangelist Church in Clinton.

He recalled his impression on visiting the Church Brew Works, a brewpub in a converted former Catholic church in Pittsburgh.

"There was a conflict between logic and emotion," Mr. DeMille said.

"The logical side of me said, 'Well, the place has long since been deconsecrated - it's no longer the sacred home of the real presence of Christ.' Looking around, the logical side also said, 'At least the building is nicely preserved, rather than an unsightly parking lot or an apartment complex.'

"Then the emotional side looks around and thinks, 'Oh, what was this before - what happened?' It's a gut reaction to seeing that which still looks like a church inside, now having this decidedly secular use."

The Rev. Richard G. Roger was the last pastor of Notre Dame des Canadiens. "Notre Dame left me before I left the parish," the 53-year priest, now retired and living in Leominster, recalled of the church's closing in 2008.

The current campaign to save the building is "because of its architecture, not because of its religious significance," Rev. Roger observed.

He drew a comparison to the Old Stone Church by the Wachusett Reservoir in West Boylston.

"That thing fell apart and they rebuilt it just because it looks nice," Rev. Roger said.

"Architecturally it's attractive, it's appealing. It's been there for a long time. There were a lot of feelings to preserve it because of that. But it's no longer a church.

"For us, (Notre Dame) is supposed to be a place of worship, and it ceased being that when it closed," he said.