

Windows from closed church find new life

Rohan Mascarenhas Religion News Service | Feb. 1, 2011

NEWARK, N.J. -- Crouched on a scaffold, Ray Clagnan gingerly tapped his hammer near Saint James' feet, hoping to set them free.

Clagnan, a stained-glass expert, worked slowly, pane by pane. Soon, he moved to Mary Magdalene, carrying away her resplendent image in four pieces.

During a break, he marveled at the level of skill displayed on the windows.

"You would never see decorations as elaborate and detailed as these anymore," he said. "The painting in each piece, each frame, makes it special."

For the first time in roughly 80 years, the saints and prophets of Sacred Heart Church are on the move. But they will soon find new life among the dead in an arrangement that one church official called "a match made in heaven."

Tall and brightly hued, their depictions on 36 stained-glass windows will be sent to three Catholic mausoleums by the end of this year. The work marks the final chapter for the Italian Renaissance-style church that was shuttered last June after years of declining attendance.

Hoping to salvage the hundreds of items left behind, church officials have plans to reuse what they can, from the oak pews to the Saint Patrick statue that now resides in a bar in South Orange, much to the chagrin of church officials.

After extensive restoration, the windows -- worth \$150,000 -- will be placed in new mausoleums.

"We're not stockpiling this stuff," said Troy Simmons, the archdiocese's patrimony project director. "We have an agenda to keep the heritage living on."

Two trends are driving the transplant effort. As Catholic populations dwindle, more than 100 parishes were asked to close in the past six years, said Jim Goodness, an archdiocese spokesman. At the same time, church officials have also started to build mausoleums at cemeteries as land has grown more scarce.

The archdiocese wants to fill the new facilities with the same icons worshippers came to love every Sunday in their churches.

"The idea is we have a lot of beauty and we don't want to see that go to waste," Goodness said. "Parishes do cease to exist, but the spiritual feeling is something that everyone wants to continue."

The restoration offers some comfort to former parishioners who are still disappointed the church, once the anchor of a bustling neighborhood, has shut down.

?The closing of the church is still a great loss to the community and the end of the tradition,? said James Zazzali, a former chief justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court. ?But at least the physical vestiges of the church will continue. That's some consolation.?

Special attention will be paid to the windows, which most likely came from a German studio, Simmons said.

Once the figures come down, Clagnan will take them to his studio to be cleaned, a process that includes dipping the glass in horse shampoo. The liquid is gentle enough not to scrub off the paint, Clagnan said.

If all goes to plan, the first glass could be in Maryrest Cemetery in Mahwah by October.

?They are among the highest quality around today,? Clagnan said. ?They are top of the line.?

[Rohan Mascarenhas writes for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.]

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