

Rev. Jerry Boland leaves Holy Family Parish after 12 years of big changes

By Monica M. Walk

After a dozen years leading Holy Family Parish through rejuvenation and growth, the Rev. Jerry Boland left as parish administrator at the end of June to become pastor at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Glenview, IL. His move is the result of the Archdiocese's policy of relocating parish priests to a different church every 12 years.

Built by the Rev. Arnold Damen in 1857, Holy Family Church appeared to be in the path of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Fr. Damen, on a mission trip in Brooklyn, asked Our Lady of Perpetual Help to save the building, promising to light seven candles before her statue if the church was spared. The wind shifted, the church was spared, and the candles were lit. Seven electric lights continue to burn around the clock at the shrine to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the east transept of Holy Family Church.

"I feel quite a connection," Fr. Boland said. "I have a long devotion to Our Lady, and now I am going to a church with her name. I am blessed to go there, as hard as it is to leave Holy Family."

When Fr. Boland arrived at the parish, he expected only a brief

stay. The church was in leadership transition after staving off demolition the decade before. Fr. Boland was the first non-Jesuit priest to lead the church.

"The idea was that I was a short-term solution until a long-term solution could be reached," he said. "It dawned on me about two years ago that I became the long-term solution."

Holy Family is one of Chicago's oldest churches. Known for its beauty and craftsmanship, the church structure deteriorated as the neighborhood changed socioeconomically in the 20th century. It endured fire, flooding, and proposed demolition before its revival led by parishioners, former parishioners, and the general public.

Rebirth of church, community

"The church was wrapped in barbed wire when I arrived 12 years ago," Fr. Boland recalled, likening the building to a cat with nine lives. "Now, we have new buildings, development, and economic diversity all around us. There used to be enormous poverty. Now, we have both brain surgeons and homeless in our parish. There is enormous power in that diversity. This oldest neighborhood is experiencing a big rebirth."



The Rev. Jerry Boland (right), longtime administrator of Holy Family Parish, with Pope Francis.

Highlights of that rebirth include a large wedding ministry and the largest first communion class in many years—30 children. "This reflects our population and is a sign of vitality and growth," Fr. Boland said. "It bodes well for the future."

"We have known him as an administrator, a spiritual guide, one who leads by example, a counselor, listener, friend, and a gifted homilist who nourished and challenged us over the years to grow beyond ourselves, to become the best we can be," said Sister Eileen Tierney, pastoral associate.

About 400 families belong to the parish, up significantly from a core group of about 50 when Fr. Boland arrived.

The church continues to serve the spiritual needs of Saint Ignatius College Prep next door, including Mass and retreats, and the Jesuit community continues to use the church for meetings. A few years ago on the church grounds, the Archdiocese of Chicago installed a healing garden for survivors of sexual abuse. An updated website includes church news, events, history, and weekly bulletins.

The parish provides a food pantry serving 200 people each

month and a literacy center; it also has undertaken a major initiative for dealing with domestic abuse and violence. Fr. Boland noted the neighborhood's rising socio-economic status has led social agencies to move to areas of greater need, spurring the parish to do more social outreach. He also cited the large numbers of young adults in the parish as catalysts for new initiatives.

"We have found Fr. Jerry to be open and supportive of new ministries, and in the past few years have seen the addition of the marriage ministries and the wedding wall outside the hospitality room," Sr. Tierney said. "He has said yes to the domestic violence awareness committee and young adult ministry. All he does, he does with a great sense of humor, care, and concern for others."

The church's rich past remains an influence.

"I had never been in a parish with so much history," Fr. Boland said. "The church oozes history. You can see 150-plus years of Chicago history through the lens of Holy Family history. It is unusual for a parish to have a metropolitan identity like Holy Family does."

The church's past has included some surprises. After discovering a

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locked vault at Holy Family, Fr. Boland had its 14-foot door drilled open by a locksmith who noted in that there is "never anything" in such locked spaces. The door at Holy Family swung open to reveal a room filled with golden vessels, vestments, and relics from the church's earlier days.

"It was a wonderful thing," Fr. Boland said. "We became known as the church where they found all the gold. It further connected us with the rich history of Holy Family Church."

The church also was given an historic pipe organ from Denmark, replacing the original organ that had been sold in 1970. "We were blessed to be the recipients," Fr. Boland said. "It is a glorious enhancement."

Restoration a constant

Restoration remains ongoing. Fr. Boland noted something always needs repair on a building so old, including a recent electrical system upgrade as well as architectural preservation. He feels the structure is about 75% restored. Workers have retrofitted and restored the front doors—which Fr. Boland believes are the oldest publicly used doors in the city—to their original glory.

The congregation gathered June 8 for a farewell Mass and reception for Fr. Boland.

"Testimonials at the luncheon all echoed the same message: gratitude for all he had done for us and meant to us," said Parish Council President Ray Walsh. "Sentiments of love, respect, and appreciation were as evident as the abundance of food prepared and served by his parishioners. We were trying to thank a man who had never failed to thank everyone else."

"Fr. Jerry came to Holy Family, and left it 'wholly family,'" Walsh added.

Fr. Boland's successor, the Rev. Mike Gabriel, became administrator on July 1. Fr. Boland noted Fr. Gabriel's diverse past parish experience as well as his work on poverty and hunger.

"He comes here more equipped than I did," Fr. Boland said. "He will be a great addition, and he is very excited."

Looking back on his tenure at Holy Family, Fr. Boland said, "I learned a lot more than I brought. Holy Family was my first city parish, and I had little experience with the African American community. There was the challenge of this monument of a church in a neighborhood being reborn in our midst. This is unlike any parish I served at before. The parishioners' passion and the sense of history and looking to the future are very inspiring to me."

"I feel enormously grateful for the faith of church members," he added. "I am a different and, hopefully, better priest."



Photo by John White, courtesy Holy Family Parish

Fr. Boland (right) accepts a liturgical vessel containing rare relics from the Rev. Richard Fragomeni of the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii.

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