



175th Anniversary Moment

“He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23)

THE SECOND BURNING OF FIRST SAINT PAUL’S

While the Chicago Fire of 1871 demolished one of First Saint Paul’s earlier structures, a more recent fire event almost brought the church’s celebrations of its 140th anniversary in 1986 to a fiery conclusion.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, October 26, 1986, several members of First Saint Paul’s who lived across the street at 1255 Sandburg Terrace were awakened by the sounds of breaking glass and fire engines screaming to a halt on Goethe St. As they went to their windows, they saw smoke and flames pouring from the office area of the church building. By the time Sunday services were scheduled to begin, many members were already aware of what had occurred during the night. Although the fire did not directly affect the sanctuary, the entire building suffered from smoke and water damage. While no official cause of the fire was ever proven, it was believed to have started as a cover-up to a burglary of office equipment.

Under any circumstances this catastrophe would have challenged the congregation, but it was especially trying because it occurred within days of several events that were to culminate the church’s 140th anniversary celebrations. In particular was a special Reformation service to be held the following Friday, October 31, with special invitee the archbishop of Chicago, the Rev. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

Because the sanctuary was not structurally damaged, after a preliminary assessment it was decided to hold that Reformation service as planned. That week saw a flurry of activity to eradicate as much of the smoke and water damage as possible, and the service took place despite the lingering smell of smoke in the sanctuary. In his remarks to those in attendance, Cardinal Bernardin commented that “in 1846 you would probably never have thought of inviting a Roman Catholic cardinal to share his greetings with you—especially at a Reformation Day service—and even if you had invited him, he probably would not have come,” which evoked chuckles from those in attendance according to newspaper reports of the service. First Saint Paul’s senior pastor Delayne Pauling emphasized that the invitation to the cardinal was not “trying to make a new statement or a theological breakthrough, but only to witness to our oneness in Christ.”



Members of Saint Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1301 N. LaSalle, welcome Cardinal Bernardin at a special service on October 31, marking the congregation’s 140th anniversary. Pastor H. David Brummer, associate (left), Bernardin and Pastor Delayne H. Pauling enter the worship area of the church. Chicago Catholic photo by Timothy Auer

In the following months work proceeded on restoring the building. The restoration was done under the auspices of architect Paul Straka, who had been an associate of Edward Dart on the construction of the building in the late 1960s. Temporary cubicle offices for the pastors and staff were set up in Fellowship Hall. While the office and kitchen areas required a greater degree of attention, the entire building, including its heating and electrical systems, needed work. In addition, various enhancements, including enhanced lighting in the lounge and Fellowship Hall, along with a motion and fire detection system providing complete building security on a 24/7 basis, were installed. Throughout this period, regular Sunday services were held.

On Sunday, July 12, 1987, the restored and enhanced First Saint Paul's building was rededicated to the glory of God and the ministry of the Gospel. During service the following prayers were expressed:

Most high God, we give You thanks for the gifts of those who have built and restored this House of Prayer to Your glory. We thank You for being with us through these difficult days and for the blessings You continue to bestow on us. We look forward to the ever-increasing opportunities for ministry in the midst of this urban metropolis. May God continue to bless and use us in this ministry to His glory.