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Handout for Father Nicholas Menedis

The Church Was Going to Close Because the Mortgage Couldn't Be Paid

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I heard that the church was in grave danger of closing forever because the mortgage could not be paid when I was in the second grade of the Holy Trinity parochial school. We were playing in the school yard, on Worthen Street, that late Autumn morning, when I heard the news. I didn't understand about mortgages then, but I did understand that the church was going to close and that was pretty awful. I immediately summoned in my mind the distressing thought that I wouldn't be a choir-boy anyone Sunday mornings--and what would I do?

I was eight then and it was hard to believe that the Byzantine-domed Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox church, corner of Jefferson and Lewis streets, in the heart of the Acre, could be closed. It was impossible. And all of a sudden, it was looming as an awful possibility. Our "English" teacher--that would be Miss Florence Shanahan--talked about the church's closing if the parishioners didn't secure more money to keep the mortgage payments. The two Greek teachers also informed us, with tears in their eyes.

We were walking back home that morning, past Worthen Street, past the Boy's Vocational school, corner Lewis and Broadway, and across the little Broadway bridge. There were ramshackle buildings on the side of the canal, towards Fletcher Street, on Adams Street, and most were storehouses and warehouses for junk-dealers. My companions were equally glum about the prospect of church closing, and we were along Adams Street, heading for Market, lost in a discussion of the impending tragedy.

We met a couple of chums coming out of St. Patrick's Boys' School and we all went to Peter Chagaruly's drug-store, almost next door, for candies. But the mood persisted. The church was going to close.

We remember the stirring sermon the following Sunday. After the regular service, the priest got up on the high pulpit, with its wonderful wood-work, and started reciting the history of the church. And he at length came to the tragic story of the mortgage. The bank had to have the money on the following Thursday. If it didn't have it, the church was going to close.

In after-years, of course, I learned that banks were not so hard-hearted--that even if the payment was not made in full the church would have remained open--another extension would be granted. But, at the moment, the situation was, to minimize it, dire and stark and simply awful.

In the middle of the priest's speech there was the high shriek of an elderly woman, who had been standing near me. She must have been about 75 if she was a day. A dark-brown

kerchief covered her hair and her face was lined with many lines. She had been working in the mills since she was 14--and was a sweeper now at the Boott Mills. She started weeping and blurting out to the priest that her greatest possession was her gold wedding ring, and she tugged and tugged endlessly at the wedding finger to pull it out. It seemed hours before she was able to pull it out. But she did pull it out and holding it aloft told the priest that she was giving the ring to the church--so that it could be exchanged for cash and would help out in paying the mortgage payment.

You could hear sighs and crying all around. The old widow's mite--a golden wedding ring--had been offered. Shouts increased as others started offering their rings and their gold watches and crumpled old dollar bills. The priest was in tears. Perhaps, perhaps, he said, we could get enough to make that payment. The old sexton came out with a big wooden basket, paper-lined, and put it in front of the altar--where it looked so incongruous against the beautifully, elongated icons--Byzantine fashion--of the saint's.

Lines formed on all sides to help fill the baskets. I kept count on the gold watches, necklaces, endless rings. I counted up to 57 and lost count.

More baskets were brought and filled. It was a highly emotional experience as each donor uttered words as he or she dropped the gift into the basket and did the sign of the Cross; I could hear the crying but I must confess that the big thought in my mind was the thought that I would sing some more with the choir. All was not lost.

The donations kept up for hours--endless hours. At the end, the church officials started counting the watches, rings, etc.--and the figure was announced. A young jeweler, one of the parishioners, looking over the watches, etc., and said that he thought there was more than enough to make the mortgage payment. A cigar manufacturer, who was a church official, said that if it wasn't enough, he would certainly make up the difference.

The priest climbed up to the pulpit again, the huge chandelier was put on. That chandelier, by the way, was considered in my boyhood days, as a sign of the future and fate itself. Twice pieces of crystal--or whatever--have fallen from it--and during that week, leading parishioners have died.

The priest said that the church was saved. He said it slowly in a whisper. Shouts of joy went up. The church was saved. More tears. And then the recital of "Our Father, Who Art in Heaven. . ."

When you are eight you do not understand all the implications--or any--for that matter--of life. You do not understand that this church was the great dream in the early years of the century--that is was built against all odds--that is, financial odds. It was a gamble taken that the future would help to pay off the big mortgage.

You do not realize when you are eight what sacrifices the church meant. These men and women worked in the mills, worked long hours, sacrificed much for their children--and their church. And you realize, now, that these occasions of making the mortgage payment were occasions of impending tragedy which tore at the hearts of the parishioners.

There is a surplus in the church funds now. The mortgage was paid many years ago. And pews have been installed in the church--and its golden dome has been re-gilded several times. But in those days of 30 or more years ago, the mortgage hadn't been paid and there was that constant threat of the church closing. They had built the future with this church their solace and their survival--and that church had to stay alive.

And alive it is--and there are plans to build a community center, to house the little parochial school and other church activities. The church stands at the corner of Jefferson and

Lewis Street, as a living monument to the sacrifices of immigrants who came here to this New World to cherish new dreams, to build new lives.

The following Monday after the services which saw the church saved, the classes at the Holy Trinity Greek parochial school had a new liveliness and a new spirit. In the afternoon, Miss Shanahan got on the piano and played a new song-- "The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers" and we were all trying hard to remember all the words. Even now, I think I can recite most of the words of that song-- "the toy shop door is locked up tight and everything is quiet for the night," etc.

I remember particularly that elderly woman who was a sweeper in the Boott Mills. She went to church every Sunday and every evening at six. This was her very life--her very existence. And I like to remember her sacrifice--and her leadership that Sunday morning at the church.

These have been my people. This has been the church they have worshipped in. This has been the dream realized. A new generation has grown up. Life, it seems to me, is so much easier for this new generation. And one reason it is better is because of those early pioneers who gave their all for the future. Their memorials to the future may not be sensational. But one memorial stands out --the Byzantine-domed Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox church. END