

DAILY NEWS

St. Patrick's Is Open

'America's Parish Church' Is Big Apple's Faith Haven

BY CHRISTOPHER WHITE

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On Christmas Day 2012, fiction writer Ann Hood took to *The New York Times* to describe her desperate search in Providence, R.I., for a church to pray inside.

While she was raised Catholic, she hasn't practiced her faith in decades. Suddenly, however, when she felt the desire to pray, she had nowhere to go.

It wasn't until the next day, when she was in New York — after seven failed attempts at visiting churches in Providence — that she finally found the place that she'd been looking for.

"As I turned to walk to the subway, a sign caught my eye: ST. PATRICK'S IS OPEN," she wrote. "I read it again. ST. PATRICK'S IS OPEN. Although I quickly realized the sign was there because of all the scaffolding around the church, I still couldn't help but feel that it was also there just for me."



America's Parish Church

On March 17, 2012, St. Patrick's feast day, I was on the steps of St. Patrick's when New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan announced that the cathedral would undergo a \$177-million restoration project.

At the press conference, Cardinal Dolan described the need for restoration in strong terms: "Now, we're not talking about a nice idea, folks, or some cosmetic facelift. We're talking about the very survival of our beloved cathedral. This cathedral, simply put, is cracking. The bricks are crumbling and falling; the renowned windows are rattling and splitting; the heat, the air and the plumbing is old; the outside, as you see, is crusted with grit; and the roof is leaking. We don't really have a choice but to repair."

While the full project is slated to take five years, I decided to return a year later to examine the progress that had been made.

St. Patrick's Cathedral — hailed by Cardinal Dolan as "America's Parish Church" — stands proudly on New York's Fifth Avenue, directly across from Rockefeller Center and in the center of Manhattan. But other sites can't compete with the crowds or the history of the cathedral, with its 5.5 million visitors a year (more than the Empire State Building).

Construction on the Cathedral began in 1858, under the supervision of then-Archbishop John Hughes, though it was not completed until 20 years later, in 1879.

Since then, it has been visited by Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, along with many U.S. presidents and foreign dignitaries. Yet it is the likes of the previously mentioned Ann Hood and thousands of other New Yorkers like myself who have come to call it their home.

While the cathedral is primarily known for its neo-Gothic architecture — most notably its spires — the interior is also filled with remarkable gems. Altars and shrines to the likes of St. Rose of Lima, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Our Lady of Czestochowa line the perimeter of the cathedral, along with the altar to St. Patrick — the patron saint of the Archdiocese of New York — made popular by Irish immigrants of old and new generations. Among all of the sites to see, however, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the most visited.

Benedict's Visit

In April 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI came to the United States, he celebrated Mass at St. Patrick's. "I am particularly happy that we have gathered in St. Patrick's Cathedral," he said in his homily. "Perhaps more than any other church in the United States, this place is known and loved as 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17). Each day, thousands of men, women and children enter its doors and find peace within its walls.

"Archbishop John Hughes ... wanted this cathedral to remind the young Church in America of the great spiritual tradition to which it was heir and to inspire it to bring the best of that heritage to the building up of Christ's body in this land. I would like to draw your attention to a few aspects of this beautiful structure which I think can serve as a starting point for a reflection on our particular vocations within the unity of the Mystical Body. The first has to do with the stained-glass windows, which flood the interior with mystic light. From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendor. ... It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. ...

"The unity of a Gothic cathedral, we know, is not the static unity of a classical temple, but a unity born of the dynamic tension of diverse forces which impel the architecture upward, pointing it to heaven. ... So let us lift our gaze upward! ... Let us be joyful witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel! ...

"The spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral are dwarfed by the skyscrapers of the Manhattan skyline, yet in the heart of this busy metropolis, they are a vivid reminder of the constant yearning of the human spirit to rise to God."

Restoration in Progress

The restoration of the cathedral has been divided into three phases, with the first phase focusing on the exterior and the second and third phases on the interior. While scaffolding has covered the cathedral exterior over the past year, Structure Tone, the cathedral's contractors, informed me that it will be removed soon, providing visitors a full view of the sides of the cathedral from the street level.

In recent months, much of the work has shifted to the interior, with workers stripping away layers of old paint, repairing water-damaged areas of the ceiling and beginning the refurbishment of the main organ in the choir loft. Soon to begin: cleaning St. Patrick's prized stained-glass windows, including the famous rose window that overlooks Fifth Avenue.

According to a Structure Tone employee, churches of this size should be repaired or restored roughly every 20-30 years. The last restoration to St. Patrick's, however, was done in the 1970s and, before that, in 1940. Neither project was as comprehensive as the current effort, which will not adversely impact the cathedral's eight daily Masses. While the renovations will require sectioning off portions of the church, the cathedral will remain open.

Story of New York's Past

As I toured the cathedral recently, I was granted access to areas that most visitors aren't aware of: High above the choir loft, in the attic of the cathedral, is a story of New York's past — an old rigging system for bells that would ring before Mass, writings dating back to the turn of the 20th century and even messages from firefighters who had lost loved ones during 9/11.

These markings and relics of history tell the story of a cathedral that has been a refuge and home to people of all faiths and even none at all, people who have found comfort in St. Patrick's. This beauty is what is being preserved and restored in this restoration project and will continue to be a gift to the next generation of New Yorkers, tourists, parishioners and perhaps even future popes.

Indeed, St. Patrick's is open.

*Christopher White
writes from New York.*