

Apr 5, 2010

12:00 AM

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Errol Laborde: Sorrow and Anger (But Now Hope) at Two New Orleans Churches

By Errol Laborde
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Clearly there was something distinctive about this church's history when a parishioner told me on Good Friday that that day was the first time she had been inside the church since "the night before the raid." There are certain benchmarks in the history of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, located on Louisiana Avenue near Magazine Street: One is the year 1894 when the church opened, another is August 2005 when the levees broke, and the other was Jan. 6 (the Feast of the Epiphany) 2009, the day of "the raid." That was when police officers, at the request of the archdiocese, arrested parishioners who had been occupying the church while hoping to prevent its closing.

Many church doors have been locked for good in recent years, not only in New Orleans but also globally, mostly due to population shifts, but the shutting down of Our Lady of Good Counsel and nearby St. Henry church just did not make sense. Both still had active parishes that were willing to provide for their operations. Nevertheless, an obstinate former archbishop got bad recommendations on church closings from advisers who did not grasp the spirit within some parishes. What followed was an ugly episode of broken promises, hurt feeling and "the raid."

There are many reasons to be offended by what happened at the two churches -- and not all have to do with religion. Especially in a city trying to rebuild its neighborhoods after a disaster, churches are an enduring, and endearing, link to those neighborhoods. If there was a building connected to any other religion -- or to no religion at all -- and if that structure was part of a neighborhood's history and heritage, I would hope for that building to survive, too.

A person might be moved to evoke St. Dymphna, the patroness of insanity, to try to understand an organized religion (whose followers are increasingly disillusioned by its scandals) that locks out loyal parishioners who merely wanted their churches back and who were willing to provide for them.

Christianity centers on the notion of hope through resurrection. This past Good Friday, the Easter message showed some promise, like sprouts breaking through the dark winter ground, at the two Uptown churches.

There's a new bishop in town, Gregory Aymond, a native New Orleanian, who, parishioners at both church parishes say, has been open and honest. In previous days communication with the archdiocese was done through intermediaries; now there is direct contact with the bishop. Christopher Nalty, the pastor at nearby St. Stephen Church, has also helped the deprived parishioners ride the waves.

On Good Friday both Good Counsel and St. Henry, though technically "suppressed," to use Vatican terminology, were allowed to open for a few hours in keeping with the day's tradition of Catholics visiting nine churches. So many people made the trek that free bottles of water were provided. There was good news being spread at Good Counsel that day: The bishop has allowed for there to be a Mass there in April to celebrate the church's namesake's feast day. Meanwhile, at St. Henry, hope was high that when parishioners celebrate their annual parish reunion in the summer, they will again have access to the church and its grounds. That in itself is a victory after last year when the parishioners had to do their reuniting in the street because they were locked out of the church that many of their ancestors had built.

Bishop Aymond has spoken about healing, and all agree that that seems to be happening, one wound at a time. Unlike the story of Lazarus, healing comes slowly within the church, but Jesus didn't have to be concerned about offending priests whose mistakes must be reversed.

Resurrections, when they happen, don't always occur within days but in months, perhaps years. One would hope for some haste from the archbishop so that by next Easter a new benchmark can be added to the churches' histories -- the day that they reopened for good.

Krewe: The Early New Orleans Carnival - Comus to Zulu by Errol Laborde is available at all area bookstores. Books can also be ordered via e-mail at gdkrewe@aol.com or (504) 895-2266.

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