

Their Church Shut and Now Sold, Parishioners Fight On

By CAROLYN MARSHALL

SAN FRANCISCO, April 1 — From the beginning, adversity threatened the well-being of St. Brigid Church, the cornerstone of an Irish Catholic parish here that has sustained a devoted flock for more than 140 years.

Torrential rain delayed the christening of the original structure in 1864. St. Brigid, renovated at the turn of the 20th century to look almost as it appears today, survived the earthquake and the fire of 1906 and the strains of the Great Depression.

But for the last 12 years, St. Brigid has faced another formidable adversary: the leaders of this city's Roman Catholic Church.

In 1994, the Archdiocese of San Francisco closed St. Brigid, along with 10 other churches, blaming dwindling attendance and the need for earthquake-proofing, which officials said could cost \$5 million to \$7 million for St. Brigid alone.

For more than a decade, a feisty group of parishioners has fought first to save the chapel from demolition (battle won) and then to block its sale to a private owner, a cause lost last year when, without warning, the archdiocese sold St. Brigid to the Academy of Art University for \$3.7 million.

Now the group, the Committee to Save St. Brigid Church, is warring with the new owners to preserve the building as a protected San Francisco landmark. City supervisors, who passed a resolution in March last year to nominate St. Brigid for landmark status, are helping to broker a deal.

At issue is what part of the church to declare a landmark. The university, which plans to use the church as an auditorium, agrees that the outside of St. Brigid must be designated a landmark. But the parishioners also want much of the interior saved.

Chris Blum, a board member of the university, said landmark status for the interior was never part of the plan. But the parishioners' group wants the city to preserve the confessional booths, the Stations of the Cross and the 12 icons that surround the inner sanctum.

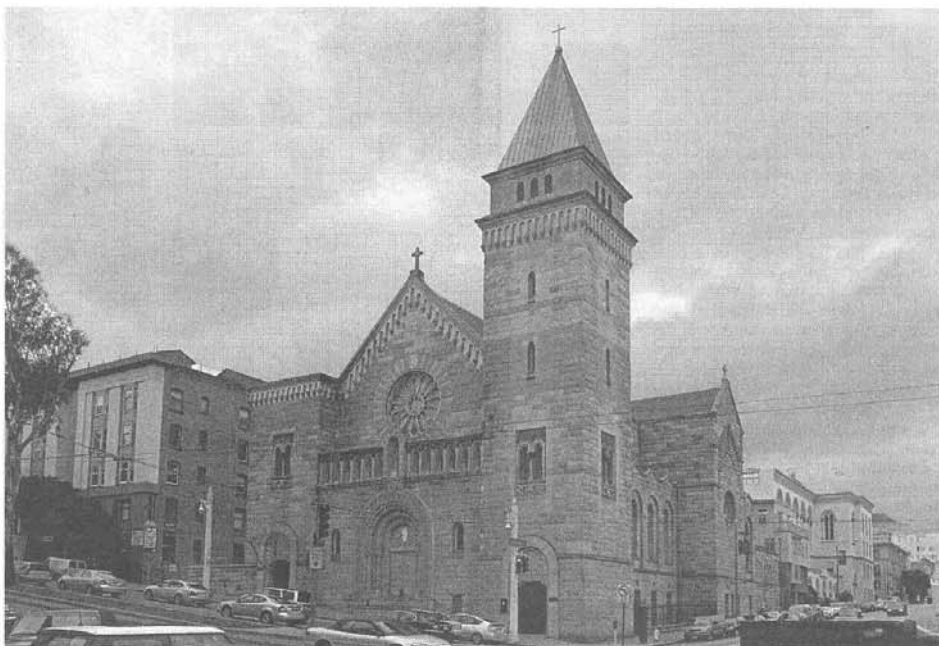
"We've been negotiating all along trying to find out what they want, but I think they want the thing to be a church again," Mr. Blum said. "The issue now is with them and the Catholic Church, and we are just caught in the crossfire."

Disputes between dioceses and congregations have erupted around the nation as the Roman Catholic Church liquidates assets, selling off valuable real estate and religious artwork worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Church leaders insist that the consolidations and sales are necessary because priests are in short supply and shifting demographics have sent urban families to suburban parishes.

The San Francisco Archdiocese, meanwhile, has said it will use the revenue, at least from the sale of St. Brigid, to pay for legal settlements to victims of sexual abuse by priests and other costs associated with the lawsuits.

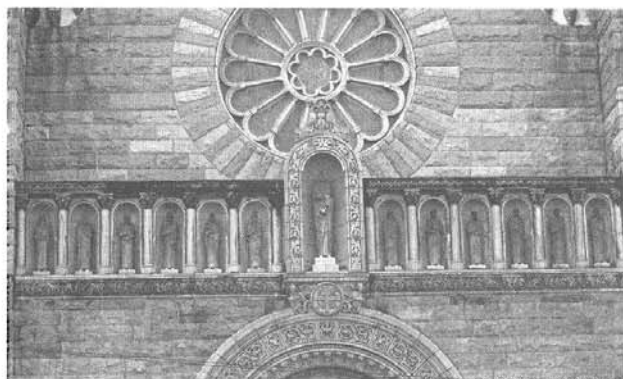
That announcement did little more than fuel the St. Brigid dispute, already considered one of the longest-running and most contentious conflicts between diocese and flock in the country.

Members of the parishioners' group have staged protests, risked arrest, filed lawsuits and taken their



Photographs by Jim Wilson/The New York Times

St. Brigid Roman Catholic Church in San Francisco was closed in 1994 and sold last year to an art university.



Committee to Save St. Brigid Church

A parishioners' group and the university agree that the exterior should be granted landmark status, and negotiations on the interior continue.

case to the Vatican. Last October, parishioners formed a human chain around St. Brigid in a physical confrontation to block the archdiocese from removing religious artifacts.

"The reason for the sale is money, pure and simple," said Joe Dignan, the chairman of the group, who has St. Brigid roots that date to the turn of the 20th century when his grand-

The City of San Francisco enters a dispute on a church's landmark status.

parents worshiped there. "I even think they kept the church closed because St. Brigid was so vocal. There is a level of vindictiveness in the archdiocese."

Maurice Healy, a spokesman for the archdiocese, recalled the October confrontation with equal bitterness last week. He said the event was "nasty and contentious," and called the acts of the parishioners "not Christian." Mr. Healy said they had misunderstood the archdiocese's ac-

tions.

"The church was trying to return the building to profane use by removing artifacts," Mr. Healy said. "Some artifacts were seen as a way of keeping the church intact with the idea of having a service there someday. It simply was not going to happen."

Mr. Healy said the parish reorganization was not based on accounting but rather was "a spiritual decision to determine how best to serve the people." Even after St. Brigid was closed, he said, the archdiocese searched for ways to reopen it, perhaps as a museum to honor Catholicism in the West.

But the archdiocese and other religious leaders in the state supported a 1994 state statute exempting churches and religious structures from landmark regulations at the discretion of the religious institution.

Michela Alioto-Pier, a city supervisor whose district includes St. Brigid and who has shepherded negotiations between the Academy of Art and the parishioners' group since January, believes that the university is trying to appease the parishioners. But she also said it was easy to understand why the group members could not shake their distrust. Even the cost of the earthquake-proofing, the prime reason for closing St. Brigid, appears to have been overstated by the arch-

diocese, she said.

"People felt betrayed," Ms. Alioto-Pier said. "There have been several discrepancies. The cost of renovation, the reasons for closing, and the commitment to negotiating."

Last year, as the city and the archdiocese discussed ways to grant landmark status to St. Brigid, Ms. Alioto-Pier said, the archdiocese pulled out.

"We were in the middle of the negotiations, and the property was sold," Ms. Alioto-Pier said. "So it was a little strange."

The university and the parishioners are scheduled to meet again as early as next week. If the interior of the church gains landmark status, Ms. Alioto-Pier said, the university will have difficulty getting the permits required for renovation. So both parties have been standing their ground.

"We could landmark the interior of the building with the snap of a finger," Ms. Alioto-Pier said. "But we don't want to get into a legal battle. We're looking for an amicable deal."

Quotation of the Day,
Page 2, every day,
in the News Summary.
The New York Times.