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An S.F. parish gets no help from above

- Ken Garcia

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SACRED HEART CHURCH was one of the more memorable structures that survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Too bad it won't survive the seismic shifts in demographics and the Roman Catholic archdiocese's finances.

The recent announcement that the graceful Western Addition church would be closed at the end of the year because the archdiocese cannot afford an \$8 million retrofit may have surprised some parish newcomers, but it's thoroughly in keeping with the archdiocese's bumpy recent history. As the patron saint of many lost causes in sin city, I would love to fight to keep the church open. But I'd have better luck trying to convince the Vatican to allow women to become priests.

Ten years ago, the archdiocese, then under different leadership, shocked the city faithful when it disclosed plans to close nine parish churches as part of a "consolidation" program based on changing demographics, declining mass attendance and the cost of retrofitting buildings damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

That tremor also played havoc with Sacred Heart, though the mostly black church on Fillmore Street was not on the original closure list. But time has not been kind to the parish's fortunes, and 15 years after pieces of the church's ceiling fell following the quake, so has any real hope of saving it.

The grim reality is this: The archdiocese has long calculated riches in some of its most scenic properties and the desire to develop those sites further has been part of its long-term strategy. At one point, after closing venerable, quake-damaged St. Brigid's Church on Van Ness Avenue, thought was given to selling the property, but that plan was put on hold and then basically dropped after a pointed backlash from well-connected parishioners. But if a monied community like St. Brigid's cannot get its beloved church re-opened, then a relatively poor and tiny parish like Sacred Heart would need a miracle to convince the archdiocese to fix it.

At this point, even a holy benefactor with an \$8 million check for the collection basket probably wouldn't keep the church from closing. Archdiocese spokesman Maurice Healy told me that it makes no sense for the organization to spend so much to retrofit a church that often draws only 100 people to Sunday mass. That's especially true, he said, considering that nearly \$55 million is being spent retrofitting a number of other Catholic churches throughout the city.

"Closing a parish in San Francisco because of earthquake damage is not a new phenomenon," Healy said.

Yet it's still a sad one. People like to say that a church is a community, not a building, but tell that to the nomadic tribes that have been created from former parishioners like those at St.



Brigid's, who have held masses in parks, parking lots and meeting rooms to pray that the doors of their beloved church might one day be thrown open.

Members of the church-going flock at Sacred Heart feel they've been betrayed, since they worked so hard with officials from the archdiocese over the years to try to keep the parish open. Robert Pritchard, vice president of the church's superb gospel choir, said that parishioners scrambled each year to make sure that they met the archdiocese's annual fund-raising appeal.

Church members feel even more disheartened since the archdiocese threatened to close the adjoining Sacred Heart Elementary School three years ago because it was bleeding red ink. But after I led a public crusade through my Chronicle column, a number of benevolent and dedicated souls chipped in to keep the school open and it's now doing better than it has in years.

So why doesn't the archdiocese perform a similar sacrifice for the 107- year-old church? Parishioners say there's noting spiritual about the reason.

"Though my faith in Sacred Heart Church remains strong, my belief in the altruism of the archdiocese has been shattered," parishioner Maggie Montgomery wrote. "Corporate mandates and economics have taken precedence over faith and true values."

The town will lose more than just a pretty Romanesque church if it's shuttered and eventually torn down. The building is steeped in city history.

Once largely populated by Irish immigrants, the community was transformed during the 1930s and '40s when thousands of blacks came to San Francisco to work in war-related jobs. The jazz and blues clubs that thrived in the Fillmore district during the '50s became legendary, and at the height of the civil rights movement the Black Panthers operated a food program at Sacred Heart.

The church withstood a century of turbulence. It just couldn't overcome a decision made upon quiet reflection.

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