

## **Help needed for church in West Side neighborhood**

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As the story goes, a Franciscan priest from New York receives a call and request from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago to relocate for the purpose of renovating a church rectory and mission in a troubled neighborhood on Chicago's West Side.

The Rev. Robert Lombardo, known for his dedication to outreach efforts for the poor, considers the offer and schedules a visit to Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church, 3808 W. Iowa St. He is shocked to find the parish rectory and buildings in near ruins.

Yet even in its dilapidated condition, the site renders an unusual mystique. Throughout the years, the church, rectory and adjoining school have served as a shrine to one of the most tragic events in Chicago's history. In December 1958, 92 children and three nuns perished in a disastrous and fast-moving fire. An additional 77 people were seriously injured in the terrible blaze that made national and international headlines.

Almost immediately, Lombardo senses the historic significance of the building and the precious memories of children and families who were part of the parish and school. A 1979 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, Lombardo decides to stay in Chicago and eventually contacts the Chicago Area Notre Dame Alumni Association, asking for assistance and resources. Within weeks, he also calls and visits many Chicago-area priests and parishes to summon support and assistance for the massive renovation project.

During once such visit to St. James at Sag Bridge Catholic Church in Lemont, Lombardo discusses the renovation plans with Deacon John Wilkinson, who becomes equally as enthused about the project. Wilkinson visits the Chicago church with Lombardo, then returns to share the information with members of his own parish. A small local group then begins to embrace an assistance plan.

Jane Hopson, a St. James parishioner and executive manager of the Oaks Hotel and Conference Center in Burr Ridge, offers to send bedspreads, blankets, pillows, sheets, towels and kitchenware to the

parish. Timing was perfect because the hotel, formerly the Ramada of Burr Ridge, was undergoing a massive renovation of its own. Hopson was pleased to be in a position to send useful items to the church. Whatever couldn't be used by the parish could be directed to families in the neighborhood, she told Lombardo. She also agrees to accompany Wilkinson on a tour of the rectory that helped her to realize the importance of the work and her donations to the cause.

"Their goal is to create a stronger Catholic presence in the neighborhood," Hopson said. "There is so much work that needs to be done, but there are so many people who really want to be part of the change. It's heartwarming to be able to help them. Once Father Lombardo moves into the rectory, he will be able to make a major difference in the community. There's so much potential to do so much good for the area."

Wilkinson's influence spread to other St. James parishioners, many in the church's Holy Name Society. Mike Lavery of Burr Ridge was one of several men who stepped in to do interior work. He volunteered to varnish and sand a wood entranceway to a rear patio, dedicating about 18 hours with three visits.

"It was tedious work but in the end, it was very satisfying to see the results," Lavery said. "The building has really turned around with all the work that's being done. There's a sense of pride in knowing what will come next and recognizing the potential for the future."

Lavery describes Lombardo as a "real charismatic guy" who has done so much to lead the way in a short period of time.

"This will be a home for him and a special place that touches the lives of a lot of people," he added.

Anyone interested in volunteering time, labor, food pantry items or services to the Chicago parish may contact Wilkinson at (630) 257-7000 or Lombardo at (773) 235-3132. Those who have commercial specializations in electrical, roofing, plumbing and maintenance are welcome to be part of the Our Lady of the Angels team.