

The Northeast Catholic parishes of Minneapolis never died....but they have been Reborn

By Cain Pence

The second weekend of June brings an amazing event each year to the streets and Catholic parishes of Northeast Minneapolis. Nearly 500 Catholic parishioners and 50 priests and altar servers march through the streets of Northeast Minneapolis carrying the Eucharist and stopping at seven separate historic Catholic parishes during the annual Northeast Minneapolis Eucharistic Procession. Bystanders, bicyclists and beer hall enthusiasts stop, stare and snap photos as a block long procession publicly honors the Eucharist while halting traffic along such busy thoroughfares as University and Broadway Avenues.

The local media gives a great deal of attention to local beer festivals, Art a Whirl, Gay Pride events and Aquatennial parades. So be it. Live and let live. However, if you want to see one of the great forces that built the Eastside of Minneapolis and literally built some of the most amazing buildings in the city of Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota, then the local media should cover and residents should visit the stunningly beautiful churches along the Eucharistic procession.

Demographic changes, families leaving for the suburbs and concerns about crime and poor schools led many Northeast Catholic families to leave the neighborhood and the churches they grew up in. Many churches experienced serious decline over the last three decades where church funerals were much more common than baptisms. An increasingly secular society and a much-publicized clergy sex abuse scandal no doubt contributed to declining church attendance. Yet, over the past decade, some amazing changes have occurred. Take another look at these houses of faith and history along the route of the Northeast Eucharistic Procession. Each church has a remarkable history, a beautiful place of worship and in many cases, a new birth of faith and life.

Holy Cross Church, where the Procession begins, has long been home to a vibrant Polish community. Many new Polish immigrants still come to one of the only churches in the Twin Cities that still offers a Mass in Polish. Now clustered with the faith communities of St. Hedwig, St. Anthony of Padua, and St. Clement also in Northeast, these historic churches are led by the charismatic young priest Father Spencer Howe. As always with the Church, good priests lead to full churches and bad priests lead to empty pews. Northeast now has a number of good priests and parishioners are returning.

The next stop on the Procession is the historic Slovak church of St. Cyril and Methodius, located directly across the street from the popular Dangerous Man brewery. Down to a few families of mostly Eastern European origin a decade ago, this wonderful church now hosts a large Ecuadorian immigrant community. Masses in Spanish are often standing room only and the parish hosts a popular festival with outstanding ethnic food.

The Procession proceeds to St. Anthony of Padua parish, the oldest Catholic Parish in Minneapolis founded in 1849, almost a decade before Minnesota became a state. Connected to the sprawling Catholic Eldercare, St. Anthony serves residents of a growing retirement and senior complex. Next door to a state of the art physical therapy center (built where the old rectory once stood) St. Anthony of Padua will no doubt benefit from the block long senior living center currently being built by Catholic Eldercare across the street at the corner of Broadway and Second Street.

The next stop on the procession is the stunningly beautiful parish of St. Boniface. Full disclosure, I'm biased, it's where I attend Mass. Built by German muscle, the Church of St. Boniface now welcomes one of the largest French African communities in the state. Just two weeks ago, Archbishop Hebda led the celebration of St. Boniface's 160th anniversary. Hundreds of people packed the spacious pews to listen to an amazing Francophone choir whose music was, in the words of Archbishop Hebda, "better than the music at the Cathedral." A community founded by German Catholics is now kept alive by French speaking Africans and pastored by a welcoming and determined Father Biju Mathew....who was born and raised in India!

The Procession continues next door to the amazing St. Maron's Parish, long the home of Lebanese Catholics in Minneapolis. Located across the street from the celebrated Emily's Lebanese Deli, the community of St. Maron's is affluent and lively. The Taste of Lebanon festival held each year is wildly popular and the community even has its own senior living complex on campus. The Church is lovely, the people are friendly and the food is arguably the best of any parish festival.

Directly across the street from St. Maron's the Procession stops next at St. Constantine Ukrainian Church. One of the most ornate and exquisite churches in the entire state of Minnesota, St. Constantine hosts regular pierogi lunches, with what many locals would claim are the best pierogi on the Eastside of Minneapolis. Sadly, many locals have never been inside this incredible church. A home of faith, this church is an absolute work of art and has welcomed Ukrainian immigrants for countless decades with Masses still said in Ukrainian.

One block over from St. Constantine, the Northeast Eucharistic Procession ends at the Church of All Saints. Long a home for Catholics of mainly Polish descent, the Church of All Saints was hurting for members just a few short years ago. There was a real chance the Church might close or sold. Then, the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, a traditional Latin Mass organization, moved in. They fixed up the Church and filled the pews. Outside when they worship, one does not find many compact cars but rather six to ten seat vans and SUVs to drive the many children they bring to Mass in Northeast Minneapolis from all over the Metro. All Saints has been completely transformed by traditional Latin Mass Catholics

The Eastside of Minneapolis has changed a lot since I was a boy. I used to always hop the trains by the old Bunge grain elevator and explore the many abandoned buildings along the tracks. Now, those buildings house numerous microbrews and countless artist studios. Young couples have refurbished many of the rundown duplexes in the neighborhood and old structures have become hip with marketing and tech companies transforming rundown buildings I used to love to throw rocks at. Yet, the Eastside of Minneapolis still has those beautiful special old structures with steeples topped with crosses. Built with stone and glass, it is faith that has kept them alive. Like the neighborhood around them, these houses of worship have transformed and been reborn. Fitting, since these old Catholic Churches believe in a two thousand year old story where resurrection plays a very big role. One weekend each June, the Northeast Catholic parishes take to the streets to let the world know that greatest of all stories continues on the Eastside of the Mississippi.

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