

# Historic St. Michael Church closes in Fells Point

Despite Deacon Richard Novak's familiar injunction to "go in peace to love and serve the Lord," few parishioners seemed eager to leave following the July 31 morning Mass at St. Michael in Fells Point.

It was the last English-language Mass at the historic church at the corner of Wolfe and Lombard Streets and was soon to be followed by the last Spanish-language Mass later that afternoon.

The Baltimore landmark closed its doors forever after the final liturgies - a victim of excessive expenses associated with maintaining the parish campus.

With the notes of the closing song still reverberating in the church, Mass-goers lingered in the pews to exchange hugs, wipe away tears and snap photos.

Many huddled around historic church landmarks - as if consciously searing into their memories final images of colorful stained glass windows, impressive marble statues and grand paintings of the apostles by Filippo Costaggini, the Italian artist who completed the frieze in the U.S. Capitol.

"This is undoubtedly a weekend of mourning and loss," said Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, pastor of the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick, "but it's not the final word - just as death is not the final word as it gives way to resurrection and new life."

English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parishioners will relocate to Sacred Heart of Jesus in Highlandtown Aug. 6-7, joining with English-speaking Sacred Heart parishioners and Spanish-speaking parishioners of Our Lady of Pompei to form a new bilingual, multicultural faith community.

St. Patrick, which currently is part of the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick, will become a mission of the new Sacred Heart of Jesus parish. Father Wojtek will serve as pastor.

Founded in 1852 to serve the needs of German immigrants, St. Michael has long been known for reaching out to the poor and marginalized. In the last two decades, it has had a special ministry to Spanish-speaking parishioners who came to make up the majority of the congregation.

In his homily, Father Wojtek struggled to contain his emotion as he noted how the Eucharist has been the center of parish life at St. Michael.

Because people gave of themselves, he said, St. Michael parishioners established a nearby medical clinic that would later become St. Joseph Medical Center. They educated thousands of children in parish and commercial schools. They evangelized Baltimore – establishing a pioneering Way of the Cross through the city and nurturing social outreach ministries to Hispanic immigrants.

“Nothing can separate us from the love of God that comes to us through Christ Jesus,” Father Wojtek said. “Nothing. Not buildings, not statues, not memories.”

Estella Chavez, a Cuban immigrant who found a spiritual home at St. Michael, said it is difficult to see the church close.

“For Hispanics, it has been a beacon because it was the first (Spanish-English) bilingual parish,” Chavez said. “It’s almost like losing your country again because you come here and you find in your parish a home away from home.”

Chavez will join Sacred Heart and is optimistic about the future.

“As Catholics we believe the Lord is always in the tabernacle no matter where the tabernacle is,” she said.

During the July 31 offertory procession at the closing Masses, parishioners brought forward symbols of various aspects of St. Michael’s long history – including a relic of St. John Neumann, the parish’s first pastor. Redemptorist Fathers James Gilmour and John Lavin, former pastors, were present for the liturgies.

School Sister of Notre Dame Mary Ann Hartnett, who has long taught in St. Michael’s religious education program, told The Catholic Review that it was St. Michael’s welcoming spirit that made it such a special place. She remembered that

when the church closure was announced earlier this year, a 9-year-old parishioner offered her words of consolation.

“He said, ‘You know what, Sister?’ she recalled, “We’re all sad, but we’ll all go to Sacred Heart and we’ll all be happy again.”

Ana Hoegg Ayala echoed those sentiments.

“St. Michael Church will be empty,” the longtime parishioner said, “but my heart – and the hearts of many other parishioners – will always be here.”

Celebrate the new Sacred Heart of Jesus parish

### **Aug. 6**

- Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament at Sacred Heart, 6-9 p.m. following a 5 p.m. English Mass.

### **Aug. 7**

- Car caravan and eucharistic walking procession to Sacred Heart from St. Michael beginning at 9:30 a.m.
- 11 a.m. bilingual Mass celebrated by Bishop Denis J. Madden; reception to follow.