

St. Patrick in Fells Point re-opens after six months

By Matt Palmer

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St. Patrick Church, which has been closed since an Aug. 23, 2011 earthquake shook the mid-Atlantic region, re-opened for an Ash Wednesday Mass Feb. 22.

The church's steeple received significant damage after the 5.3 magnitude earthquake, with an epicenter in Virginia, reached Baltimore. St. Patrick is the oldest parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and its church, built in 1898, saw concrete parts of its steeple fall to the ground below.

St. Patrick became a mission of Sacred Heart of Jesus parish in Highlandtown in 2011, weeks before the earthquake. It had been part of the Catholic Community of Fells Point, but nearby St. Michael's parish closed and Sacred Heart of Jesus was named the Archdiocese of Baltimore's hub of Hispanic activity.

Now, six months later, St. Patrick is open and will be used for the annual St. Patrick's Day Mass March 17, with Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden serving as celebrant. Many Irish families who were integral to the parish in the 20th century take part in the day's festivities.

Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus and St. Patrick, admitted to being choked up as he began Mass on Ash Wednesday.

"It's emotional just telling them that the tabernacle's been empty for so long and tonight we're going to put the Lord back there and light the candle," Father Wojtek said. "It's a spiritual home for people. They missed it and could just sense that. I felt it too. It's just powerful. It was a significant day to be here."

Hispanic families from across the Baltimore area rejoiced at the re-opening.

“Coming to the United States, this was the first church we visited,” parishioner Nelson Baires said. “It’s like home. It’s the immigrant church – St. Patrick.”

It did not come without hard work. A Baltimore City inspector condemned the building after the 2011 damage.

“He had to come in and inspect to make sure everything was OK,” Father Wojtek said.

Some parts of the church that were damaged have not returned, Father Wojtek said. There’s no timetable on those items.

Many parishioners, and Father Wojtek, took the closure hard. Some wondered if it would ever open again. April became the focus date, so Ash Wednesday was a surprise.

“In the beginning, it seemed like it was going to be very soon and then after that it seemed like it was going to be much longer,” Father Wojtek said. “All of the sudden it was moved up and here we are.”

Father Wojtek said business owners in the Fells Point community told him that their stores suffered with the closure of St. Patrick.

Father Wojtek said the church’s re-opening could be a re-birth for the community, adding, “It’s basically saying, ‘We’re here, we’re open for business and come back.’”