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Villager photo by Nick Brooks

St. Brigid's Church on Avenue B at E. Eighth St.

## Miracle on Avenue B: 'Angel' airdrops \$20 mil, saves church

By Albert Amateau

St. Brigid's parishioners, struggling for more than 10 years to save the church built by Irish boatwrights during the Famine Year 1848-'49 on Avenue B, rejoiced last week when the Catholic Archdiocese announced it had accepted an anonymous \$20 million donation to restore both the church and parish and to endow the parish school.

City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Councilmember Rosie Mendez, State Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer joined the local Committee to Save St. Brigid's in a surprise celebration on Wed., May 21.

"The power of prayer should never be underestimated," Edwin Torres, president of the Committee to Save St. Brigid's, said later. "I don't know who the donor is but I respect his request for anonymity — and God bless him."

The donation includes \$10 million to address the serious structural problems of the church at 119 Avenue B and restore it to serve again as a parish church, plus \$2 million for an endowment for the parish and another \$8 million to support St. Brigid's School and other Catholic schools in the area that might need help.

"The two additional gifts to create an endowment for the parish and to support the parish school are a powerful testament to the donor's goodness and understanding. He has my heartfelt gratitude, as I recently told him [when we met] in my residence," said Egan in a statement issued last Wednesday.

But the identity of the donor remained a secret. Nevertheless, Joseph Zwilling, spokesperson for the archdiocese, told reporters last week, "It was not Matt Dillon." The actor, who filmed

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the church for a scene in his 2002 movie "City of Ghosts," has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Committee to Save St. Brigid's.

Michael Rosen, who lives in the Christadora House condominium on Avenue B at E. Ninth St. and is active in neighborhood preservation, also denied being the benefactor. He also denied a report in the Daily News quoting him as knowing the gift was coming and that he believed the donor was from the neighborhood. Rosen said the donation was a wonderful gift for the community and cited the opinion of the medieval Jewish sage Maimonides that giving anonymously is the highest form of charity.

"It's not me — I've been writing a book for the last six years," Rosen said. "Someone I bumped into on the street speculated it was Bette Midler. ... All that matters is that someone gave money to Catholic education and the church's endowment. I just know what I read. Just personally, I respect this guy giving anonymously. If someone wants to be secret, let them be secret."

There was also speculation last week that the donor was Chuck Feeney, an Irish-American philanthropist who has given about \$400 million anonymously through The Atlantic Philanthropies, which he endowed. The organization did not return a phone call to The Villager last week.

Zwilling said the donor had met with Cardinal Egan shortly before the pope's visit to New York during April 15-20.

"It got put on hold until the pope left and then we put all the details together," he said.

The archdiocese has engaged an architect for the church's restoration, which will involve repair of a serious crack in the back wall of the church and other structural work on the roof and the floor, Zwilling said.

"It will be many months before the church is ready to open," Zwilling added.

The historic building across from Tompkins Square Park was declared unsafe in 2001 because of the crack in the east wall, and Masses were shifted to the basement cafeteria of the parish school, built in 1959 at Avenue B and E. Seventh St.

In 2003, the archdiocese secured a permit to convert the venerable church building into a residence. Zwilling said at the time that St. Brigid's might be converted into the new home of the Cabrini nursing and rehabilitation home on E. Fifth St., but there was no further movement in that direction.

Then, on Sept. 12, 2004, Bishop Robert Brucato, vicar general of the archdiocese, came down to Avenue B to tell the largely Hispanic congregation of less than 400 members that the parish would be dissolved and that they would have to go to Mass at other churches in the area. A declining Catholic population in the neighborhood was a key reason for the dissolution, along with the estimated \$600,000 cost of repairing the church, designed by Patrick Keely, an Irish architect. At the same time, the Order of Trinitarians, who had been administering the financially ailing parish and the parish school for the archdiocese since 1996, decided to no longer assign priests to St. Brigid's.

Desperate to save the church building, parishioners raised \$103,000 for what they thought was a building fund, but by the time the Trinitarian priest, the Reverend Michael Conway, said the last Mass on Sept. 19, 2004, it became clear that the money had largely gone for regular parish expenses.

In 2005, the archdiocese converted the 2003 alteration permit into a demolition permit and removed the church's organ, statuary and altar for storage in Staten Island. The Committee to Save St. Brigid's went to court to prevent the demolition.

Committee members prayed and marched around the East Village and up to St. Patrick's Cathedral a few times to urge Cardinal Egan to save the church, where generations of immigrant Catholics, first Irish and then Hispanic, were baptized, married and mourned.

The committee lost its case in State Supreme Court and the Appellate Division in Manhattan more than a year ago and the case is pending before the State Court of Appeals in Albany. Also in 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission refused to consider St. Brigid's for landmark protection. The commission cited the church's structural frailty and previous alterations, such as the 1962 removal of the two spires, that compromised the building's historical integrity.

Torres said last week that the committee has not yet decided with its appeals lawyer, Marisa Marinelli, of Holland and Knight, on whether to continue the lawsuit to establish the legal

point that the board of trustees, rather than the archdiocese, has the ultimate say in the disposition of a parish church. The issue may make not make much difference in the end because the St. Brigid's board is made of two archdiocese representatives plus the parish priest (assigned by the archdiocese) and two lay members of the parish — meaning the archdiocese would likely always hold a 3-to-2 majority on the board.

But the three-year legal battle has gained time for St. Brigid's. Two previous anonymous but unspecific donations were offered and rejected before the archdiocese accepted this one.

During the past three years, Torres taught Catholic confirmation classes to teenagers between the ages of 13 and 16 at St. Emerick's Church on E. 12th St. and Avenue D.

"The classes were full and it just proved to me that there is a need for another parish in the neighborhood," he said.

Regardless of whether the committee decides to pursue its case before the Court of Appeals, Torres said, "I think the Committee to Save St. Brigid's has served its purpose. Of course, we need to be sure. All we have now is a press release from the archdiocese. But I'm sure the cardinal is true to his word. The Lord moves in mysterious ways — with all the publicity maybe St. Brigid's will reopen not with 300 members but with 1,000 or more."

With reporting  
by Lincoln Anderson

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