

St. Anthony of Padua R.C. Church

160 Court Street, Buffalo, New York

TRADITIONAL SPEAKING by S. Casarotto, CS 10/19/08

NOT JUST BRICKS AND MORTAR

“The Church is not buildings“ is the mantra heard long enough concerning the ongoing restructuring of the parishes in Buffalo and elsewhere. Of course, we know that a group of Catholics who gathered under a thatched roof or under a siringa tree may be a lively faith community, just as the early Christians were gathering for their ritual celebrations in their own homes. We know that basilicas and other beautiful churches fell victims of earthquakes, fires, looting, old age and general neglect. But we also know that even Attila respected Christian Rome and Ataturk saved Hagia Sophia in Constantinople from demolition. On the other hand, during the Renaissance, the Romans grew angry at the Popes who, in their quest for an urban renewal of the Eternal City plundered ancient monuments. That’s how the Colosseum became a quarry and Bernini melt the bronze frontal of the Pantheon for his famous baldaquin in St. Peter’s Basilica. This prompted the Romans to quip: “*Quod non fecerunt barbari fecerunt Barberini*”. (What was not done by the Barbarians, was done by the Barberinis.”

Buildings, large and small, are necessary. In fact, great civilizations (Maya, Syrian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman) are judged also by the monuments they built. In the 1st century, commenting on Roman architecture, Vitruvius wrote: “We Romans build what we are.” For centuries, Catholics built what they were. When we look at Roman basilicas or the grandiose churches the Irish, the Germans and the Polish immigrants built in Buffalo and elsewhere, we also admire majestic architecture, colorful stained glass windows and thundering organs. That forces us to remember that it was their Catholic faith, their Christian priorities which made them treat God as God. These churches were not only the place for dignified liturgies but also the rallying point of the community around them and centers of service and social networking and cohesion.

The Italians who came to Western New York were the poorest of the poor immigrants. As early as 1875 they made requests to the local hierarchy to have their own church and school as the Irish, Germans and the Polish had in order to express and preserve their Catholic faith and religious traditions. While those communities had many immigrant priests, very few Italian priests followed their flock. The Italians were told that diocesan priests were enough for their needs. Besides, there were too few and too poor. But the Italians appealed to the Vatican. Eventually, in 1890, with the arrival of the Scalabrini Fathers, the building of a church was approved, but it was “*so that Italians may understand what it means to support a church*”. Not really what we would call a pastoral concession. Still, the early Italians, also with the financial support of the missionaries, managed to build in only 6 months St. Anthony Church. This little jewel became the center of the spiritual, educational (the early building included the first Italian Catholic bilingual school in the country) and social life of the Italian community in WNY. It became also a center of prayer for generations of Buffalonians and downtown workers and visitors.

Even today, a quick look at the unique linguistic, religious, cultural, social and missionary activities show that people who come to St. Anthony’s from all over WNY, are not just nostalgic of “bricks and mortar.” It is no small wonder that many visitors, upon entering our church, say in awe: “Here we feels like praying.”