

A Nightmare on Elm Street

I have raised up a chosen man from my people, with my holy oil I have anointed him so that my hand is always with him and my arm strengthens him.

A year ago, on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bishop Thomas G. Doran of the diocese of Rockford elevated a church downtown on Elm Street, St. Mary's Shrine, to the status of an oratory. (See "The Bells of St. Mary's," *The Rockford Files*, October 2002). The declaration seemed the crowning moment in the five-year-long comeback of the second-oldest Catholic church in Rockford. Before the fall of 1997, when the bishop entrusted St. Mary's to the care of the Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest, the church had failed as a parish. Downtown Rockford simply no longer has enough residents—Catholic or otherwise—to sustain the massive red-brick Gothic structure. The Institute, which, at the invitation of Bishop Doran, ministers to the Latin Mass Community of Rockford, took on the task with gusto, under the leadership of St. Mary's rector, Fr. Brian A.T. Bovee.

O God, who for the defense of the Catholic

Faith and the restoration of all things in Christ didst fill Saint Pius, Supreme Pontiff, with heavenly wisdom and apostolic courage: grant in Thy loving kindness that by following his teachings and examples we may attain eternal rewards.

Between the first Sunday of Advent, 1997, and Christmas 2002, Father Bovee oversaw a massive renovation of the church. The altar rail was restored; two side altars were constructed, honoring the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph; the steep roof was replaced and the steeple repaired; and, at a cost of over \$400,000, the stained-glass windows ("some of the finest in the Midwest," according to stained-glass expert Frank Houtkamp) were removed, cleaned, repaired, and reinstalled. Organist and choir director Mark Dahlgren, at great personal expense, replaced St. Mary's aging organ.

The restoration of the church was paralleled by the growth of its congregation. By this summer, average Sunday Mass attendance had reached 425; most Sunday liturgies were standing room only. Father Bovee raised the possibility of adding a second Sunday Mass. (He already celebrates two Masses on weekdays.)



And then, over Labor Day weekend, while Father Bovee, Bishop Doran, and other top diocesan officials were out of town, everything changed.

Last November, I mentioned Winnebago County's plan to build a massive new jail over nine square blocks, across the street from St. Mary's (see "The Cohn Zone," *The Rockford Files*, November 2002). As I wrote,

It's an open secret that the county has long desired the property on which St. Mary's stands; now, since the jail would cover the lot in which most of the congregation parks, some parishioners have begun to suspect that Winnebago County hopes to solve the problem of public parking for the jail by making life uncomfortable for St. Mary's.

No one quite knew just how uncomfortable, however. On Thursday, August 28, county-board member Rick Pollack sent an e-mail to the board's secretary:

Sally, Here is my plan regarding the St. Mary's Church: Please have a resolution written to enlarge the land acquisition area (include the church property) for appraisal and potential purchase. At our meeting on Sept. 3, we will vote on the resolution and bring it in to the full County Board Sept. 4.

I hope to have a representative from the diocese and Paul Logli to be present for moral support. I don't want a media circus on this so I will talk to our board members. Tim Simms will check support for this at our caucus next week.



Tom Krause

Detail of the stained-glass window above the high altar. Bishop Doran signed the decree elevating St. Mary's to the status of an oratory on the Feast of the Transfiguration.

If Pollack did not want a "media circus," he should have refrained from using e-mail. By Friday, fellow board member Mary Ann Aiello had obtained a copy of the message and alerted the media. By Sunday, *Rockford Register Star* reporter Pat Milhizer had tracked down the details, and columnist Chuck Sweeney blasted the plan, calling it, in the style of a 50's B movie, "The Jail Monster That Ate Downtown," "which would erase the diversity of downtown with a macabre monolith of incarceration."

By Tuesday, September 2, the story had spread like wildfire, and Winnebago County State's Attorney Paul Logli (himself a Catholic) found himself subjected to a heavy grilling by crusading local radio talk-show host Chris Bowman. At first, Logli argued that the possible loss of St. Mary's was unimportant, claiming variously that few people worship there; that the church had suffered a fire in 1962 and had been "rebuilt," so it was not the same building that was erected in 1885; and that, because the Oratory "is not a parish," no one could be "married, buried, or baptized there."

When Tom Fleming, coming on the Bowman show with Logli, pointed out that all of his claims were false (the congregation is sizeable; the fire, while devastating, had left the structure, including all but three of the stained-glass windows, intact; and marriages (including that of Tom's daughter, Eleanor), baptisms (including those of three of my children), and even burials have all been performed at the Oratory, in accordance with canon law), the state's attorney backpedaled. The county, he now claimed, was interested only in St. Mary's school, which was last used in 1974. He apologized for any misunderstanding.

Supporters of St. Mary's, however, weren't buying his apology. When we posted a story on the threat to St. Mary's on *Chronicles'* website, e-mails poured in from across the United States and as far away as Norway and Australia. By Wednesday morning, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights had issued a press release. Catholic League President William Donohue had this to say:

We are contacting every member of the Winnebago County Board urging them to scratch this hastily drawn plan today. . . . Building a new county jail is important, but surely it can be done without demolishing a church of this sig-

nificance. St. Mary's sports a vibrant community and is led by one of America's premier bishops. In short, it merits a special place in the Rockford community.

To bulldoze St. Mary's so that local thugs can have a new home is more than insensitive—it's insane. Because of the uniqueness of this church, Catholics from all over America will keep a close eye on how county officials react.

On *The Chris Bowman Show* that morning, Donohue pulled no punches, raising even the specter of a lawsuit over Logli's comments the day before. And then the earth shook.

Bowman announced that Fr. John C. Fritz, secretary to Bishop Doran, was on the line. Father Fritz, coming on the air, asked a simple question: "Would you like to speak to the bishop?"

Bishop Doran, upon returning to town, had learned of the board members' plans. Thanking Donohue for his efforts, Bishop Doran had harsh words for a local government that has grown a bit too big for its britches. The Catholic Church "has been around for 2,000 years; when America has been around that long, then the government can start bossing us around," he said.

And that, anywhere else, might have been the end of the matter. Not, however, in Winnebago County.

Brethren, we had confidence in our God to preach to you the gospel of God amid much anxiety. For our exhortation was not from error, nor from impure motives, nor



Tom Krause

The right side altar, devoted to St. Joseph. The parish hall is also named after the saint.

from guile. But as approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not as pleasing men, but God, who proves our hearts. For at no time have we used words of flattery, as you know, nor any pretext for avarice, God is witness, nor have we sought glory from men, neither from you nor from others.

Privately, some county-board members claimed that the diocese was well aware of the county's intentions and had even expressed an interest in selling the church. The claim, however, seems dubious, and



Tom Krause

Workmen reshingling the steep roof of St. Mary's Oratory.

not simply because of Bishop Doran's vocal support for the Latin Mass Community and the Institute of Christ the King. The chancery must understand the grave consequences that accepting public money, generated by a controversial sales tax in an economically depressed city, would have for the diocese. Contributions from Catholics would surely drop. ("I already gave at the store.") Furthermore, as Bishop Doran pointed out on the Bowman show, Catholics are a minority in this part of the Midwest. The chancery surely would not risk turning the non-Catholic majority actively anti-Catholic.

I have proclaimed thy justice in the great assembly: lo, I did not restrain my lips; Lord, thou knowest.

By Wednesday afternoon, Winnebago County Board Chairman Kristine Cohn, Sheriff Richard Meyers, and State's Attorney Logli had issued a joint press release, stating that the county

has no plans to buy and/or destroy St. Mary's Church. . . . The only land that may be impacted by a connecting tunnel or overhead walkway would be . . . the former grade school building. In the event that particular building is in any way affected, then appropriate and mutually beneficial arrangements will be made to preserve or relocate the heating plant current-

ly located in the former school so as not to disrupt the Church or its congregation.

However, as county-board member John Terranova wrote in an e-mail to Bill Donohue,

a small minority of [board] members, and perhaps other officials, had initially planned to ram this proposal through without media scrutiny and serious Board oversight. They were caught, exposed and now are running for cover. If this issue were not as serious as it is, it would be amusing to hear the very members who brought this plan to resolution form now saying they would never have moved to tear down the church.

Wednesday night, at the board's public safety committee meeting, Pollack, who denied that he had ever intended to threaten St. Mary's, introduced a revised resolution that would expand the land-acquisition area to include St. Mary's property "excluding the St. Mary's Oratory." (The school and the historic rectory would both be fair game.) However, the resolution goes on to state that "the Criminal Justice Project Director is authorized . . . to report the results of the investigation including any additional property required to the Public Safety Commission." But the only additional property

at St. Mary's is the Oratory.

Parishioners from St. Mary's filled the committee room to overflowing, and many showed up the next night at the county-board meeting. During public comments, Mark Dahlgren thanked the board for reconsidering and invited the 28 board members to come to Mass on Sunday so that they could better understand what they might be destroying. Board member Larry Bauer read a letter from parishioners David and Phyllis Monty issuing a similar invitation. (That Sunday, the only board member who accepted the invitations was Aiello.)

At the end of the meeting, board member Jim Hughes moved to have the public safety committee consider building the jail "on bare land" — in other words, outside of downtown. And so, at this writing, St. Mary's fate is still up in the air, and her congregation is down on its knees.

At that time Jesus said to Simon Peter, Son of John, dost thou love Me more than these do? He said to Him, yes, Lord, thou knowest that I love Thee. He said to him, Feed My lambs.

The communion of saints encompasses more than this world, and many parishioners have noted that September 4, the day Jim Hughes made his motion, is the birthday of Judi Sharp, whose selfless devotion to St. Mary's extended beyond her untimely death last year and helped provide the funds to complete the restoration of the church's stained-glass windows. And the feast day of Pope Saint Pius X, a great leader in a time of turmoil who was committed to the restoration of the Faith, is September 3, the day Bishop Doran rallied to St. Mary's side. (The italicized readings and prayers in this article are drawn from the festal Mass of St. Pius X.)

When Bishop Thomas Doran elevated St. Mary's to an oratory, he did more than change the status of the church; he bound the Latin Mass Community and their liturgy to a particular place. This is their home now, and they have responded accordingly. They continue to trust that, with their bishop's protection, it will not be taken away.

We beseech Thee, O Lord our God, that we who have been replenished with strength at the heavenly table may, by the intercession of Saint Pius, Supreme Pontiff, be also steadfast in the faith and of one mind through love of Thee.



The grotto at St. Mary's, modeled after the shrine at Lourdes, France. The church's second pastor, Fr. Michael McLaughlin, is interred behind the railing in the lower right-hand corner.

Letter From Rockford

by Kelly P. Champlin

Ladygun Speaks Out



Firearms. A single word describes an almost infinite number of individual items and has the power to polarize an entire world. I have a personal stake in the debate. I own firearms and shoot not only for pleasure but on a competitive level. Why am I bringing this particular fact to light? Because I live in Rockford, Illinois, and our state is attempting to become the first statewide gun-free zone in the country.

The bill currently languishing in the state's Senate Rules Committee is SB1195, and it is only one of about a dozen "antigun" bills that were introduced in February of this year. SB1195 would make felons of a huge number of Illinois residents unless they destroy, render inoperable, hand over to law enforcement, or remove from Illinois a very long list of firearms and firearms accessories.

The bill reads, in part:

The General Assembly finds that the high rate of fire and capacity for firepower of semiautomatic assault weapons, assault weapon attachments, and large capacity ammunition feeding devices pose a significant threat to the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of this State, that the use of these weapons, devices, or attachments for sport or recreation is substantially outweighed by the danger these weapons or devices present to human life, and that restrictions should therefore be placed on the manufacture, delivery, and possession of these weapons, devices, and attachments.

Semiautomatic means that one round is fired every time the trigger is pulled. This bill does not cover fully automatic weapons (which fire rounds continuously until the trigger is released), which were

regulated in 1968 by the federal Gun Control Act. Fully automatic firearms are still available from private collectors, but the government has a list of requirements for purchase, including holding a "Class 3 Firearms License" (unavailable in Illinois), fingerprinting, an extensive background check, and a \$200 transfer tax paid to the federal government by the purchaser each time the firearm changes hands. Automatic weapons are no longer manufactured for civilian sale to anyone who lives in the United States. These are not guns that will be used in drive-by shootings. Assault weapon attachments? Bayonets are not exactly drive-by material, either.

SB1195 states, after proscribing the "weapons, devices, and attachments," that

Any person who knowingly possesses a semiautomatic assault weapon, large capacity ammunition feeding device, or assault weapon attachment must, within 90 days after the effective date of this amendatory Act of the 93rd General Assembly, destroy the weapon or device, render it permanently inoperable, relinquish it to a law enforcement agency, or remove it from this State.

The bill makes no provisions for compensation, no "grandfather" clauses. Simply put, *Hand over the guns, or you will be arrested and charged with felony crimes.*

This is not the first weapons ban to hit Illinois. Cook County (Chicago) has had a ban in place for a number of years and is still a very high-crime area. The authors of SB1195—Senators Munoz, Martinez, and Sandoval—have obviously put quite a bit of thought into this bill. It would make criminals of those of us who shoot local, national, and international matches; historical reenactors; and those of us who hunt to help put food on the table. (In Illinois, deer hunting with firearms is only allowed using shotguns, muzzle-loaders and, in certain municipalities, large-caliber handguns.) It would also make criminals of those thousands of us who just like to shoot at a target at the end of the range because we enjoy shooting.

The Brady Bill of 1993 was not this broadly written, and it did not decrease

the crime rates in such cities as Chicago and Washington, D.C., by any appreciable levels. It did, however, increase the value of pre-ban "assault rifles," high-capacity magazines, and certain components. A high-capacity magazine for a competition handgun may have cost, at the high end, \$40 before the ban. That same magazine, if you can find one, now runs \$80-\$150. They can be purchased if they were made before the Brady Bill took effect, but manufacturing them for civilian sale is illegal.

SB1195 would outlaw rifles and shotguns with a magazine capacity of more than five rounds, ending most rifle competition in the state. It would ban any handgun with a capacity greater than ten rounds—the majority of firearms manufactured—and would effectively eliminate handgun competition in the state. Strangely enough, there is also a weight limit. If the manufactured weight of a handgun is more than 50 ounces unloaded, it falls under this new bill. This would include the Ruger Super Redhawk and the Freedom Arms Cassull revolvers. Both of these are used for handgun hunting.

The bill would outlaw any firearm having a caliber of .50 or greater, which includes 20-gauge, 12-gauge, and 10-gauge shotguns, leaving only the .410 shotguns for hunting and recreational use, eliminating trap and skeet competition in Illinois. This particular part of the bill could also be interpreted to include many black-powder firearms, especially those that are not antiques. This would bid fair to eliminate historical battle reenactments using modern replicas of antique weapons. Antique black-powder firearms would be protected, but they are rarely fired: They are usually too valuable either monetarily or historically to risk damage.

This bill would be detrimental to the firearms industry in the state—not only to the firing ranges and gun clubs—but to the federally licensed firearms dealers and the firearms and components manufacturers in Illinois such as Les Baer Custom; Springfield, Inc.; Armalite; and Rock River Arms. Olin-Winchester, an ammunition manufacturer, would also be affected.

The trickle-down effects of the bill would also hurt anyone who sells anything even remotely associated with fire-