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When a Mob Descended on Mass

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By John J. Miller

— pose a riotous threat. Rather, the group represented a special opportunity to pack the pews. “It’s wonderful to see such a great crowd,” said Father Maurice Restivo during his homily at Ste. Anne de Detroit.

This was the 49th gathering of the Detroit Mass Mob, a group formed five years ago on social media to promote big turnouts at the city’s Catholic churches. “Our grandparents built these churches,” says Thom Mann, a retired financial adviser and one the main organizers. “They’re beautiful and people like to see them full.” Too often, they’re empty.

Detroit was once the fourth-largest U.S. city with more than 1.8 million residents in the 1950s. Today its population has fallen to fewer than 700,000, thanks to turmoil in the auto industry, racial unrest in the 1960s and the subsequent “white flight” to the suburbs. One sad feature of this deterioration is apparent on Sunday mornings, when the city’s impressive Catholic churches hold Masses for dwindling numbers of parishioners. Other cities in the Great Lakes region have suffered similar setbacks.

In 2010, Christopher M. Byrd of Buffalo, N.Y., decided to respond. Working with the leadership of St. Adalbert’s Basilica, where about 50 people would show up for a typical Mass on Sunday, he urged everyone who followed the church on Facebook to attend on a scheduled date and time. More than 300 joined his pious flash mob. “It was a very nice one-day boost in the pews and

Detroit

A mob descended on an old church in Detroit last Sunday, but it didn’t

the collection basket.” Mr. Byrd notes.

This initial achievement encouraged Mr. Byrd to scale up and involve more churches. In 2013, the Buffalo Mass Mob held its first formal event, promoted almost exclusively on social media. Facebook, Twitter and the like are often blamed for social division, but in this case they have united people in worship. Again, hundreds came.

Mr. Byrd and his allies kept it up: This Sunday, the Buffalo Mass Mob will sponsor its 35th event, at St. Bernard in Buffalo’s Kaisertown neighborhood. The idea spread to other cities such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh.

The Detroit Mass Mob has enjoyed the most success, with six events this year and crowds that have exceeded 1,000 people. The noon Mass last Sunday drew about 675 to Ste. Anne de Detroit, dedicated to the mother of the Virgin Mary and sometimes called the city’s “mother church.” Headquarters to the second-oldest continuously operating parish in the U.S., the church holds records that date to 1704, marking the baptism of the daughter of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, the French explorer and soldier who founded Detroit. Only the parish in St Augustine, Fla., started by the Spaniards in the 16th century, has an older set of uninterrupted annals.

The Detroit mobsters participated in a bilingual Mass, with readings and the homily delivered in English and French. It coincided with an annual festival on the church grounds that honors the city’s French and Native American roots, with food, music and re-enactors.

Spanish is spoken at Ste. Anne’s as well. Most of its regular parishioners are Hispanic, from a

nearby neighborhood. The church itself sits close to the Ambassador Bridge, which spans the Detroit River, the only place where you can drive south into Canada.

Most of the Mass-mob visitors were older, with fewer baby carriers in the nave or minivans in the parking lot than a suburban church would see on an ordinary Sunday. They also appeared to have a special interest in Ste. Anne’s beauty and history, judging from the large number who stayed for a post-Mass talk on these subjects.

The current brick church was built in 1886 as a two-towered Gothic-revival structure. An architectural gem, it features a vaulted roof, a massive organ, and Detroit’s oldest stained-glass windows, saved from an earlier building.

The central figure in its history is Father Gabriel Richard, who served as pastor in the early 1800s. He set up schools, published Detroit’s first newspaper, and was a founder of the University of Michigan. (An exhibit dedicated to his legacy is open at Ste. Anne’s through Oct. 15.)

He also knew something about urban comebacks. After a fire devastated Detroit in 1805, Richard offered the words that today serve as Detroit’s motto: *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*. Translation: “We hope for better things; it shall arise from the ashes.”

The Detroit Mass Mob will rise up again on Oct. 20 at St. Francis D’Assisi. “If people keep coming, we’ll keep doing them,” says Mr. Mann.

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