

Organist plays on to save church

Poletown vigil keeps him going

By Marie McGee
staff writer

Barney Topolewski sat in the choir loft of Immaculate Conception Church in Detroit's Poletown playing the organ and singing with all his heart.

His enthusiasm was a contrast to his appearance. The 52-year-old Livonian's eyes were weary and his rumpled blue business suit even wearier.

He hadn't had a decent night's sleep in days. Between working and playing the organ at Immaculate Conception, Topolewski has had little time for sleep. His rest had come only from catnaps, most of them on a pew in the choir loft.

As far as Barney is concerned, it doesn't matter. He has a mission — serving the people and the church that he loves.

Topolewski has been organist and choir director at Immaculate Conception for 14 years. His dedication includes working a steady midnight shift at a Detroit tool and die firm so that he can be available to play at all the weddings, funerals and other special services.

"Right now, he goes to work and then goes right back to the church to play the organ for the people who come to pray," said his wife, Frances. "We have hardly seen him since an around-the-clock vigil began at the Church."

AS BARNEY sits at his organ, the words from below come up to the church loft:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is darkness, let me bring light.

The organ music then interrupts the solitude for the handful of people praying. To-

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polewski's tenor voice breaks forth in a familiar hymn.

Suddenly, everyone in the church begins to sing. After a few minutes, the music stops and the people begin praying again. This time it's the recitation of the rosary — to the Virgin Mary asking for help to save the church dedicated to her Immaculate Conception from the wrecker's ball.

The land on which the 53-year-old church is situated has been sold by the Archdiocese of Detroit to General Motors Corp. to make way for the automaker's new \$500-million assembly plant. The parishioners and their pastor, the Rev. Joseph Karasiewicz, are fighting to save the church.

THE PATTERN of singing and praying around the clock has been going on since the parishioners learned that the church would be closed. Mass can no longer be said there, only singing and praying are allowed. Father Karasiewicz has been given until June 17 to move from the rectory.

But the parishioners refuse to accept the edict and are looking for a meeting soon with new Archbishop Edmund Szoka for what they hope will be a solution.

The church council's leaders feel that GM's offer to move the church to a nearby location "would be better than losing it." This idea, however, has been rejected by Cardinal John P. Dearden in one of his last acts as Archbishop of the Detroit Diocese.

The church's leaders are adamantly against a compromise whereby certain religious artifacts and parts of the building would be salvaged for a chapel that would be attached to some neighboring parish.

"We want to stay together as a parish," the determined parishioners say. "We don't ask help (financial) from the archdiocese. We are and have been self-supporting."

Friday, Mrs. Topolewski dropped in at the church to visit her husband and to add her prayers to the cause. She didn't need to ask where he was. The sound of music coming from the loft told her Barney was continuing his labor of love.

From the church pews came the sound of prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your will. Where there's despair, let me bring hope; and where there's sadness ... joy.



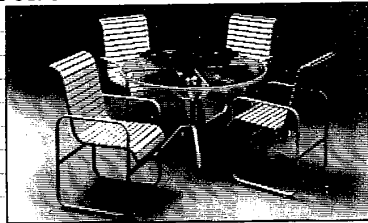
Immaculate Conception, the Poletown Church, is scheduled to be razed.

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