



VERY REV. A. DAMEN,  
Missionary.

Jesuit Father Arnold Damen. (Library of Congress, courtesy of St. Ignatius College Prep)

The efforts of Jesuit Father Arnold Damen and his confreres in the Society of Jesus in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire were neither the first nor the last word in the Jesuits' efforts to provide social services to the immigrants who populated the West Side of Chicago in the late 19th century, but they do provide a remarkable illustration, according to Chicago historian Ellen Skerrett.

The fire swept through the city on Oct. 8-9, 1871, killing about 300 people, burning more than three square miles to the ground and leaving about 100,000 people homeless.

Father Damen, namesake of Chicago's Damen Avenue, was born in Leur, Holland, in 1813, and arrived in Chicago to start a Jesuit parish in 1857, after a stop in Paris, where he was one of the first tourists to visit Versailles, and St. Louis, where he was a pastor.

Already a popular mission preacher, he was invited to serve here after a mission in Chicago in 1856 drew so many people it had to be moved from St. Mary Parish downtown to the new cathedral, north of the Chicago River, Skerrett said.

According to newspaper accounts from the 1870s, he could have chosen to build his parish on the North Side, but instead chose the far more impoverished West Side, populated by Catholic immigrants from Ireland and other European countries who were seen as squatters.

“Within three years, he had Holy Family Church built, then the largest church in the city,” Skerrett said. “It was just a huge accomplishment. Within 10 years later, he’s got the college next door.”

Those buildings — with their elaborate design perhaps inspired by Damen’s visit to Versailles — would be thrown open to those left homeless by the fire, along with a boys’ school Damen had opened on Morgan Street.

Damen, who was preaching a mission in New York when the fire began, was notified by telegram. He prayed for the fire — which started in a barn that belonged to Catherine O’Leary, a Holy Family parishioner — to spare the buildings and promised that seven lights would burn in front of the image if the Our Lady of Perpetual Help if it did.

Those lights, now electric, still burn in Holy Family Church, 1080 W. Roosevelt Road, about a mile from where the fire started.

He also authorized William Onahan, a parishioner and layman, to open the buildings to those displaced by the fire and to provide whatever aid the parish could offer.

Damen returned to Chicago two days after the fire, then left on a fundraising trip two weeks later, according to John Chandler, president of St. Ignatius College Prep, 1076 W. Roosevelt Road. St. Ignatius College Prep occupies the original St. Ignatius College building; the post-secondary school was renamed Loyola University in 1909.

“What they did was just a continuation on a broader scale of their work with people,” Chandler said. “Homelessness was rampant, people had lost their temporary possessions. Father Damen and the Jesuits had a strong network in the Midwest and the East to solicit help for people to begin to rebuild.”

While many Chicagoans have heard of the help that flowed in from around the United States, most don’t know how much assistance came from Catholic networks.

“The first things came at the request of the Jesuits,” Chandler said. “Father Damen was not just a Chicago figure. He was well known in the entire eastern half of the country.”

The Jesuits’ efforts were memorialized in an illustration that ran on the front page of the New York Irish World in November 1871, captioned “Catholic Charity: The Jesuits feeding the Houseless Sufferers of Chicago, without distinction of race or creed.”

That’s notable, Skerrett said, because the city aid society set up in a Protestant church only distributed aid to those deemed worthy of help.

Skerrett said that contributions of Damen and the Jesuits and other immigrant religious orders have not gotten the attention they deserve when it comes to the history of Chicago.

“It goes against the idea that immigrants here had nothing, came with nothing, couldn’t contribute anything,” she said. “How might it have changed the way we think about immigrants today if their contributions were recognized? It ruins the narrative that the city builders were the Protestant elite, and that cuts out a big percentage of people.”

“There was strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the nation,” Chandler agreed. “Damen boldly built, as Jesuits always do, first the place of faith, then the place of education and the place of service, to care for the spiritual needs first and then the temporal needs.”

The prejudice could be seen in the scapegoating of Catherine O’Leary, at whose barn the fire started, Skerrett said. While the city officially absolved O’Leary of any responsibility in 1997, for more than a century people believed that her carelessness started the fire because of a story a newspaper writer later admitted he made up.

The cause remains unknown. It could have been a spark carried on the wind after an exceptionally dry summer and fall.

Damen, Skerrett said, was just as much of a city builder as Daniel Burnham, albeit with a different vision.

“Burnham wanted Chicago to be the ‘city beautiful,’ she said. “Damen wanted to see it become a very livable place for working class people. The church was certainly at the center. They might be living in humble places, but they had a place of beauty that was their own, in the church. Not only was he a city builder, he was a patron of the arts. There was music and they had the school productions. They were investing in the future of children, and the future of children was to get them educated.”

By 1880, the Jesuits either operated or had a hand in starting more than a dozen parochial elementary schools, girls’ and boys’ high schools, St. Ignatius College, an orphanage, a home where unwed working women could live safely and Holy Family Church, which had more than 20,000 parishioners.

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