News



A drone view May 9, 2025, shows St. Mary of the Assumption Church at the very southern edge of Chicago.

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The church building at Christ Our Savior Parish in the suburb of South Holland, houses the tabernacle that used to be part of the now dilapidated St. Mary of the Assumption at the very southern edge of Chicago.

That's according to Jan Binkowski, a longtime parishioner at the old St. Mary, where Pope Leo XIV and his family once belonged. Christ Our Savior — through two sets of church mergers — is now known as the "de facto" home parish of the new pope when he was just Robert F. Prevost.

Binkowski's family was at St. Mary of the Assumption for 51 years.

"We knew the Prevost family ... his parents were very involved," Binkowski told OSV News. "They were a very religious family."

It was also the church where then-Father Robert F. Prevost celebrated his first Mass after being ordained in 1982, with Binkowski's son serving as lector. Shortly after his ordination, Father Prevost finished canon law in Rome and was called to join his brother Augustinians' mission in Peru. That young priest would go on to become prior general of his order, bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, and most recently cardinal and prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops, until he stepped onto St. Peter's balcony May 8 to introduce himself to the world as Pope Leo XIV.

On an overcast May morning after attending daily Mass and adoration, Binkowski stood outside the boxy yellow brick building of what used to be St. Jude the Apostle Church. She recalled her family's years at St. Mary.

The church life there was "very vibrant," she recalled.

"We were such an active church and it was a beautiful church. And back then, there were many people at church," she said.

But in 2011, the Archdiocese of Chicago, citing dwindling Mass attendance, combined St. Mary of the Assumption with Our Lady of the Apostles to form St. Mary, Queen of the Apostles.

Binkowski, 85, called it "a big transition" but also "a blessing," because her church was able to fill the gap as there were not enough laypeople involved as ministers of the Eucharist or reading at Mass at the other church.

"So we all got to be a great big family again, which was really wonderful because we were such a family at St. Mary of the Assumption, I mean, everybody. We just loved each other. ... And then when we went there (to Our Lady of the Apostles), they were so accepting of us and happy to have us," she said of the new combined parish.

But in 2019 that combined church then consolidated with two other churches — Holy Ghost and St. Jude the Apostle — to form Christ Our Savior.

Binkowski said she was "disappointed" by that change. At the same time, she said she has also accepted it, and today she's concerned with the lack of young people there.

"I hope that the whole world appreciates what [Pope Leo's] going to be doing for us and that he will bring, especially the young people back to church," she said. "That's the most important thing nowadays to me, because there is not enough love in this world."

The absence of young people at church is also a priority for Ruby Anderson, who joined St. Mary of the Assumption when she was a young adult.

At the parking lot of Christ Our Savior Parish, Anderson told OSV News about her connection to the Prevosts through her aunt and how she got to know the pope's mother, Mildred "Millie" Prevost. At the time, the Prevosts' son was away on mission in the deeply impoverished mountains of Peru and would celebrate occasional Masses while visiting back home.

"Millie was just the loveliest lady of all and she would sing in the choir and hoodwink everyone to go sing in the choir with her (like me). ... And the pope looks just like her," Anderson, 69, said.

She said parishioners helped her family feel very welcome when they first went to St. Mary of the Assumption. Twenty years later, the church closed and combined

with Our Lady of the Apostles. She said by the time the churches consolidated a second time, the church community was drastically changed.

"There were no young people. Parishes die when you don't have children. ... And so we combined with Queen of the Apostles. That was really good. It was lovely. Then, again, we aged out. And we came here. So that's how it's gone. The Catholic community in this area has just aged out. We're old people," she said.

The old building of St. Mary of the Assumption today stands empty on a quiet corner of houses, some of them looking abandoned, with very few passing vehicles and no pedestrians or neighbors in sight. The structure has a hole in the roof, caving gutters next to that hole and dry wooden doors with peeling paint. But apart from a hole in the rose window, its stained-glass windows are untouched. The buildings on its grounds have multiple pane-less windows. Inside, graffiti marks the wall behind the altar area.

"It breaks my heart because it once was a very grand place and it was a real home to me. That was my church family," said Anderson.

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However, the church building where the future pope offered his first Mass is now in the planning stages to become a possible livelihood training center — and potential space for local congregations to have church services, according to the Chicago Sun-Times.

"I think that would be really wonderful because Father Bob — that's what we call him; I have a hard time calling him Pope Leo XIV — that's part of his whole mission," Anderson told OSV News. "It was all about revival and bringing life to areas and service and love — and all of those wonderful things that need to continue. If that happens, that would be really great."

About a mile northwest of the dilapidated church building is Dolton, a suburb that borders Chicago. There, a neighbor of the house, where Pope Leo XIV grew up with his family, stood by a newly erected wooden cross near the edge of the road. Photos of young African American people are on the vertical wood of the cross; the phrase "Stop the killing" is stenciled in black marker on the crossbeam.

The pope's boyhood home has seen hard times since the Prevosts left it many years ago.

"I saw a lot of stuff happening within the years I've been here," Donna Sagna Davis, who has lived next door for eight years in the now impoverished suburb. During one period of time, Sagna Davis saw so many people "coming in and out of (the Prevosts' former) house," she suspected it was being used to sell drugs.

"A lot of fighting and all of this violence, fighting right here, shooting and stuff," she said.

The pope's childhood home is a small brick structure, now with concrete front stairs and wooden railings leading to a bright red front door. A small card with the picture of Pope Leo XIV was tucked behind the mailbox on the wall next to the door.

A Dolton Police vehicle was parked in front because of the media storm that descended on the narrow block of modest houses. Several cars stopped on the street and people got out to take photos, video and pray. An elderly woman inquired about the cross and crossed herself saying a short prayer before being walked back to a waiting car.

"This right here is helping us. This right here is bringing us peace. We're having prayer. People are coming by having prayer. The community is talking," said Sagna Davis, making a sweeping gesture.

According to Sagna Davis, the house was vacated in 2023 and is unoccupied. People magazine reported the house is for sale and that the day the pope was elected, there were "seven to eight offers on the property," the current owner's realtor, Steve Budzik, said but the property has now been taken off the market and "we are reevaluating our next move."

The decline of Dolton — with a 20% poverty rate, almost double that of Illinois, according to the 2023 estimates of the U.S. Census Community Survey — was fueled by multiple factors, such as the steady loss of manufacturing jobs that started in the 1980s and continued through the early 2000s.

Sagna Davis, a nondenominational minister and professional singer who attends St. Sabina Catholic Church in Chicago, said that since May 8, the day Pope Leo XIV was elected, there has been a dramatic difference in the neighborhood.

The tranquility was something Sagna Davis said she has been praying for Dolton to have for years. She said she was also hopeful after Dolton's new mayor, Jason M. House, reportedly stopped by to assess the possibilities for the Prevost home to be turned into a historical site.

The Chicago Sun-Times also reported the head of a nonprofit that seeks to designate and preserve landmarks said he would look into preserving the Prevost home, other related structures and St. Mary of the Assumption.

The hope that Pope Leo XIV has enkindled in Dolton is also enkindled for those who remember the shuttered church that formed him in his youth — not hope for a recreated past, but for new life in the future.

"It was a great place and it is not going to be resurrected from the smoldering ashes that it's in," former St. Mary parishioner Ruby Anderson said of the church. "But we have to carry St. Mary's with us in our hearts and bring those attributes that we loved so much, of the church, with us in our service to the community."

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This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** and **Looking for Leo in History** feature series.