News
EarthBeat



Students at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana built St. Olaf Chapel out of snow and ice on the campus' North Quad over six days at the end of January and the beginning of February 2026. (University of Notre Dame/Michael Caterina)



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If you build it, they will come.

In baseball parlance, that might mean a ball diamond carved from a cornfield. At the University of Notre Dame, it means an ice chapel out of mounds of snow.

An estimated 2,000-plus students and other members of the Notre Dame community in South Bend, Indiana, gathered the night of Feb. 2 in subfreezing temperatures to celebrate a candlelit Mass at the site of St. Olaf Chapel, a student-constructed fleeting house of worship made from snow, ice and faith on the North Quad.

Roughly 5 feet wide and 15 feet long with 6-foot ceilings, an apse, stained-glass windows and a spire peaking at 20 feet, St. Olaf Chapel was born from the winter daydreaming of two seniors and residence assistants at Coyle Hall: Welsey Buonerba and Martin Soros. Inspired by an igloo another Notre Dame student had built and the annual ice chapel students create at Michigan Technological University, they sought to construct their own monument to the snow day.

"As we got going, we realized this could be a little bit bigger than what we had expected," Buonerba said. "Rather than something fun, as a way to evangelize and to bring joy to our campus and student body. And it definitely proved to do that."

Construction began the afternoon of Jan. 27, near the end of a month that saw more than 38 inches of snowfall in South Bend, the city's eighth-snowiest January on record, according to the local ABC affiliate. Average temperatures oscillated from the single digits to the mid-teens during the students' week of building.

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Buonerba, an architecture student from Michigan, and Soros, a civil engineering major from Maryland, compared their process to the stone masonry that raised some of the world's oldest and most well-known churches. They created ice bricks

using small recycling bins. To help them freeze, they constantly ferried water from the showers inside Coyle Hall. Arches were constructed using bunk bed ladders on either side of an old car hood they found in the dorm basement.

"Anything scrappy we could get our hands on," Buonerba said.

They modeled their chapel loosely off the University of Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart and even Paris' Sainte-Chapelle. While the campus' famed golden-domed basilica took more than 20 years to fully complete, the ice chapel replica took about six days.

As the two seniors labored on the snowy quad, other students often stopped and watched in curiosity. Some even joined in the building. Others gathered icicles that were fused to create crosses along with a crucifix. A freshman named Anna came "from abroad," or the other side of campus, to assist each night.

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  Students work on constructing St. Olaf Chapel out of ice and snow on the North Quad of the University of Notre Dame in January 2026. (Wesley Buonerba)

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Students construct St. Olaf Chapel out of ice and snow at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana in January 2026. (Wesley Buonerba)

Soros and Buonerba estimated they logged 60-70 hours on the ice chapel. They worked before classes, between classes, after classes. On Jan. 28, they were out at 6 a.m. as temperatures dropped to 4 degrees below zero. They rotated rapidly through fresh pairs of dry gloves, though at times switched to latex versions to more easily shape the snow.

"It was a lot of very cold, wet hands," Buonerba said in a phone interview with the National Catholic Reporter.

The time in the cold, often alone, lent ample time to think. One topic: what to call their snow creation.

They landed on the name St. Olaf — after the 11th-century Norwegian king and martyr, not the snowman from the Disney movie "Frozen."

Eventually, they decided to hold a Mass at the chapel and gave themselves a deadline of Feb. 2, Candlemas, the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

They reached out to Holy Cross Fr. Peter McCormick, assistant vice president for campus ministry, to see if he would celebrate the outdoor liturgy. Their email subject line read "CRAZY IDEA: Ice chapel Mass!"

"My immediate reaction was pure excitement," McCormick said in an email. "Long before I had any sense that thousands of people would show up, I just loved the idea. It was creative, bold, and so easy to get behind."



Holy Cross Fr. Peter McCormick celebrates Mass outside the St. Olaf Ice Chapel on the North Quad at the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana, on Feb. 2, 2026. (University of Notre Dame/Michael Caterina)

The students recruited from the campus' multiple choirs to provide the music. They pieced together a sound system and lighting. They didn't begin advertising until two days before the Mass.

Soros said they kept expectations in check but anticipated a potentially big crowd, given the chapel's proximity to the dining hall.

"A lot of people had seen the chapel ... so there was a little bit of buzz about, oh, there's something going on," he said.

On Monday night, the crowd quickly snowballed to several thousand. Seeing so many people encircle the chapel left Soros in shock after spending so many hours toiling on its creation, often in isolation.

"It just felt very different and extremely special to be able to share the beauty that we've experienced with this endeavor with others," he said.



Approximately 2,000 students and members of the South Bend community attend an outdoor Mass at St. Olaf Chapel, a student-constructed ice structure on the North

Quad at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana Feb. 2, 2026. (University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

The assembly fell silent as the choir of 50 students began singing "In the Bleak Midwinter." Braving temperatures below 20 degrees Fahrenheit, the students prayed and even kneeled in the snow around St. Olaf. After the homily, they sang, with arms locked together, the alma mater "Notre Dame, Our Mother." One of the petitions prayed for those who suffer in the cold. Communion alone took a half hour and the priests ran out of consecrated hosts, the student newspaper reported.

McCormick called the outdoor Mass, infrequent at Notre Dame, "certainly unique." What stood out most for him was the joy, "a real sense that a life of faith can cut through darkness, discouragement, and even the cold."

"Being out in the cold and snow took away some of the usual comforts and made us very aware of where we were and who we were with," he said. "In that setting, you feel your dependence on one another and on God, which actually deepens the sense of communion."

For Buonbera and Soros, both also studying theology, building community was a goal as much as constructing an ice chapel, especially at a moment of political divisions and social unrest.



Students hold candles during an outdoor Mass at the University of Notre Dame Feb. 2, 2026. (University of Notre Dame/Michael Caterina)

"When you come together as a community and put the important things, those divisions are going to recede to the background and that unity and love and community are going to stand out," Soros said.

Buonbera added that the experience offered a metaphor about changing focus.

"On your walk to class, you can complain about the cold, frostbite, nipping you as you're looking down, just trying to get to the next place as quick as you can. ... Or you can take a second and look up and look out at the world around you and all the beauty of God's creation, and pitch in to further it and to make something with it," he said.

Looking ahead, the Notre Dame students don't have any future plans for St. Olaf Chapel. Old candle jars inside it will collect money to donate to Our Lady of the Road, the Catholic Worker ministry to the homeless. Meanwhile, temperatures are

expected to rise above freezing by Friday.

"We'll let it melt. We'll let it go on," Soros said. "It was all for the glory of God, and it'll just be a good memory soon."