



THE CATHOLIC
STANDARD & TIMES
 Newspaper for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia

TOP
Story

**St. Francis de Sales:
 Preserving a sacred heritage**



By Lou Baldwin
Special to the CS&T

For almost 100 years, the spectacular Guastavino tiled dome of St. Francis de Sales Church has been the crowning glory of its West Philadelphia neighborhood. For nearly the same 100 years, that great tiled dome of St. Francis Church has been the crowning headache of almost every pastor of the parish. It leaks.

It was repaired, and still leaked. In fact, it has been constantly repaired since, and it still leaks. Now, thanks to generous donations, grants and ongoing fundraising, the dome may be finally made watertight, and the entire structure restored to its turn of the (20th) century.

In addition to repairing the main dome and the smaller domes, the parish hopes to have extensive repairs made on the stained-glass windows and on the doors, as well as exterior cement work and other repairs and preventive maintenance before tackling the interior. All in all, the parish hopes to raise \$5 million to accomplish all of its goals.

St. Francis is a huge church, modeled after Istanbul's Hagia Sofia. It made a significant start on its restoration drive last Christmas, when its pastor, Father Zachary W. Navit was able to announce an anonymous donation of \$750,000 — which will go a very long way toward accomplishing the initial tasks.

Another grant, publicly announced May 19, is \$100,000 from Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia area interfaith group that works to support the preservation of churches and other houses of worship — and not only for reasons of architectural merit.

"Partners for Sacred Places focuses on congregations using their building to live out their mission," said A. Robert Jaeger, executive director of Partners. In all, his organization is dispensing \$750,000 in grants to 13 area churches this year. St. Francis is one of those

dispensing \$750,000 in grants to 12 area churches this year. St. Francis is one of three to receive the top amount of \$100,000; the other two are St. Mary Episcopal Church and St. Andrew and Monica Episcopal Church, both coincidentally also in West Philadelphia. A particular focus of the organization is on churches in neighborhoods that are turning around, and where the church is playing a major role in the revitalization.

"St. Francis de Sales is architecturally and culturally so beloved," Jaeger said. "The congregation is serving the community in so many wonderful ways, and they have done so much for immigrants."

His organization, founded in 1989, tries to provide seed money to help attract other grants for deserving congregations. Its own Regional Fund for Sacred Places is a startup — fueled initially by a \$1 million challenge grant from the William Penn Foundation. The matching funds were obtained from other sources, including a state grant and a grant from the Connelly Foundation.

Now, with \$2 million in hand it has sufficient funds for another \$750,000 in grants next year and most of the following year, with fundraising continuing in order to maintain its vital mission far into the future.

St. Francis has not yet finalized its plans for repair of the dome, and although coating the tiles with waterproof plastic is one option, other strong possibilities are copper sheathing or terra cotta, according to Father Navit.

While the Partners for Sacred Places grant is only a small part of the funds St. Francis will need for its ambitious restoration program, it highlights the fact that the parish and the church are considered community assets by people of all faiths.

"We stress community and are welcoming to all," said Father Navit, who noted there are 150 nationalities represented in the parish and the parish school. Many faiths are also represented at St. Francis School and in the parish social outreach programs, even while Catholicism remains the core of everything the parish does. There were 18 new members baptized at the Easter vigil this year, and another eight baptisms two weeks later.

"Eucharistic Adoration is very important to us, and the Eucharistic Adoration Chapel has been a great blessing to the parish," Father Navit said.

In addition to the major grants for the restoration, St Francis parish has already raised more than \$100,000 internally — on top of a separate, recently-completed campaign to raise \$140,000 to renovate the huge organ in a church famous for its music liturgy.

"Raising the money is entirely feasible," said Mark Supple, chairman of the parish finance council. "We've done a lot of fundraising already."

How the money is spent after it is raised is just as important. Supple notes that in the 1950s, Bishop Joseph McShea, who was then pastor of St. Francis de Sales, had the tiles on the dome entirely replaced in a futile effort to solve the leakage problem. Even at that point engineers were suggesting copper sheathing, but Bishop McShea was reluctant to change so drastically the look of the landmark dome.

"Whatever is decided, we don't want to have to do it again in another 25 years," Supple said. "This is important to so many people."

Susan Weiler, vice chair of the parish pastoral council, was initially drawn to St. Francis 26 years ago by the opportunity to sing in its excellent choir. "To have a place like this to worship is a spectacular privilege. It's really quite inspiring," she said.

In a changing world with so many different needs, St. Francis fulfills both the religious and secular needs of the community it serves, Weiler added. "It's the responsibility of good stewardship to keep it going. I can't tell you how many people have commented on the grant. They understand the significance of our church and its place in the community."

Lou Baldwin is a member of St. Leo's Parish and a freelance writer.

--
Kera Walter
Ceisler Jubelirer
1525 Locust Street, 10th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102
215.735.6760 phone
215.735.6758 fax
kera@cj-llc.com
www.cj-llc.com