

Lights out: Churches closing

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

When Christians in one body instinctively mourn with the mourners in another, or rejoice with the rejoicers, we see the ecumenical spirit at work. We Protestants did not mourn the deaths of Popes Pius XI and XII, but we did spontaneously join in lamenting Pope John XXIII's death. Today is another lamentation day. The text for my meditation is Lamentations 1:1, 4 and 2:15a (NEB): "How solitary lies the city, once so full of people! . . . The paths to Zion mourn, for none attend her sacred feasts; all her gates are desolate. . . . 'Is this the city once called Perfect in beauty, Joy of the whole earth?'"

The city of which I speak—the neighborhoods of Roman Catholic Chicago—remain full of people, indeed more full than they once were. But they are inhabited by a different, though equally precious, people than in the days when their churches were full. The sacred feasts of one part of the people of God have been replaced by those of another. And the beauty of Catholic Chicago has been replaced by other beauties, even in the midst of poverty and urban woe.

I moved to this formerly Roman Catholic-dominated city in 1952. Five years later Pope Pius XII named a church here a Minor Basilica, in a proclamation that began: "Foremost Church in America and most important Church in populous Chicago's teeming industrial center is the Shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows." Back then, "it was necessary to hold 38 services each Friday to accommodate the 70,000 people who came," according to a history of Catholic parishes in Chicago.

I read in the *Chicago Tribune* (May 17) that up to ten "west side parishes could close [their] doors." I pass some of them almost daily on the Eisenhower Expressway, the construction of which severed some of the parishes. Racial change came suddenly. Jews moved north and west, white Catholics dispersed to the suburbs, and not many of the African-Americans who moved in have been Catholics. If those ten Catholic churches close, the people of God will not have been dispersed; but those who now live in the neighborhood gather in Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist and independent churches.

Still, one mourns the possibility that these once thriving churches will close, and laments with the doughty faithful remnants who are trying to keep them open. But how can they do so? Consider the statistics: Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica, which seats 1,200 people, and once was filled for many masses each Sunday, now has a total attendance of 144 a week.

Whenever I have visited the basilica or some of the other ten through the years and have seen their faded splendor and empty pews, I could not but join in lamentation, mourning and grieving: For soaring structures or simpler buildings, built through the sacrifice of many thousands. For memories soon to be buried as the many thousands of people baptized and married there “fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.” For their sturdy reinventions as ethnic group after ethnic group passed through, leaving a deposit of prayer and the shadow of lifted hands moved by hope. For the hundreds of community service organizations, inspired by priests who were our colleagues and lay folk whose names we never knew.

The tiles within and the towers outside will fall—one at Our Lady of Sorrows already has. Resurrections and renewals do, and will, occur. But for now, we lament.