

St. Patrick's celebrates life

Church rebuilding begins

By GREG BEEBE
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WATSONVILLE — When the Loma Prieta earthquake claimed the landmark St. Patrick's Catholic Church, some skeptics may have wondered if the guardian spirit of St. Patrick had taken the day off.

But almost 3½ years later, the spirit of the saint is alive, well and the honored guest in a joyous celebration tonight at the site of

the past — and future — St. Patrick's Church. Construction began this week on a new place of worship, one parishioners hope will be ready by St. Patrick's Day, 1994.

Rebuilding has been a long, hard road for the 4,000-member parish after the Oct. 17, 1989 quake rendered the 90-year-old red brick structure too shaky to save.

In fact, there were times when even the Rev. Mike Miller, an op-

timistic sort, wondered how long it would take the stately structure on Main Street to come back.

Miller said that in the aftermath of the quake, a Whittier man, no stranger to earthquakes, told him "it takes a community seven years to recover from a calamity like the earthquake, and I remember not believing him. Now, seven years seems to me to be just about right."

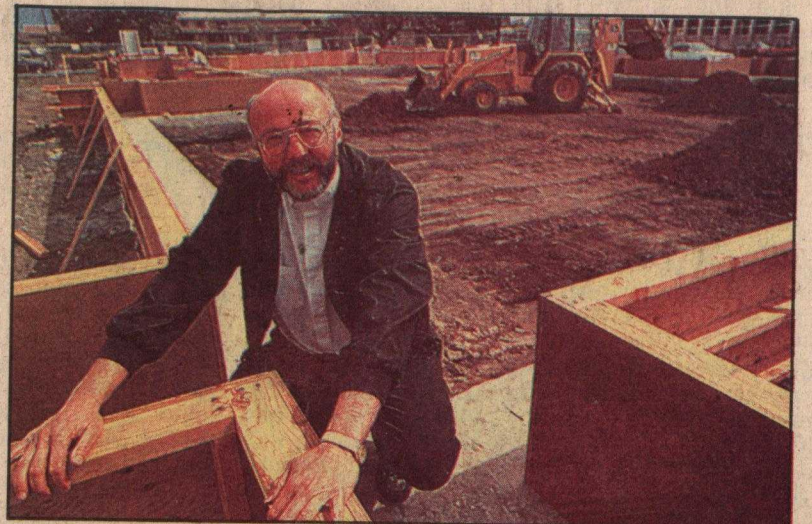
The most trying time, said the priest on the eve of the special St. Patrick's Day Observance at 5:04 p.m. tonight, came nine months after the disaster.

"We were going through a process of trying to figure out what to do," Miller said. At first church leaders wanted to retrofit the damaged structure, which turned out to be too expensive.

"It was such a dark time," said Miller. "The townspeople were dealing with trauma and anger, and just needing to release anger that the earthquake happened, that life hadn't returned to normal. There was a lot of free-floating anger."

The state and nation's economic downturn has slowed the

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Rev. Mike Miller will celebrate a special Mass today.

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church's rebound. The city's unemployment rate shot up from 11 percent in 1988 to 13 percent in 1991, and never before has St. Patrick's charitable arm, Loaves and Fishes, distributed more hot lunches, groceries and clothing to the area's poor.

"In a way this is an absurd time to be trying to put a church up," said Miller. "People are poor here. On the other hand, there's something to me wonderful about it. It's a sign of hope, a sign of confidence. I went through a little personal wondering about how appropriate it is for us to be doing something this big and this grand when there's so much poverty around."

"But then somebody told me, 'People who are poor deserve a beautiful church.'"

Bob Dwyer, director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce, said the church rising from the rubble is boosting community morale.

"Even though it isn't the original, it is going to be similar enough to reflect a historic landmark that has been part of Watsonville as long as most of us can remember," said Dwyer.

"Each project like this that is completed is just one more step toward recovery (from the quake)," he said.

The building blocks have come together slowly. The church has raised more than half of the \$3.8 million it needs, mostly from community donations. More help came from benefactors such as KQED-TV and the late rock promoter Bill Graham, who together donated \$100,000. Some \$200,000 flowed in from the national Catholic Relief Fund; another \$140,000 was donated by Catholic parishes across the county in response to an appeal

the church made on St. Patrick's Day last year.

This week, G.W. Davis Inc. a Watsonville contractor, started the foundation for the new church. The new St. Patrick's, designed by architect Russ Haisley of Monterey, essentially will be a replica of the old church, said Miller. The interior also will mirror the major elements, with some revised seating arrangements and better sound and lighting.

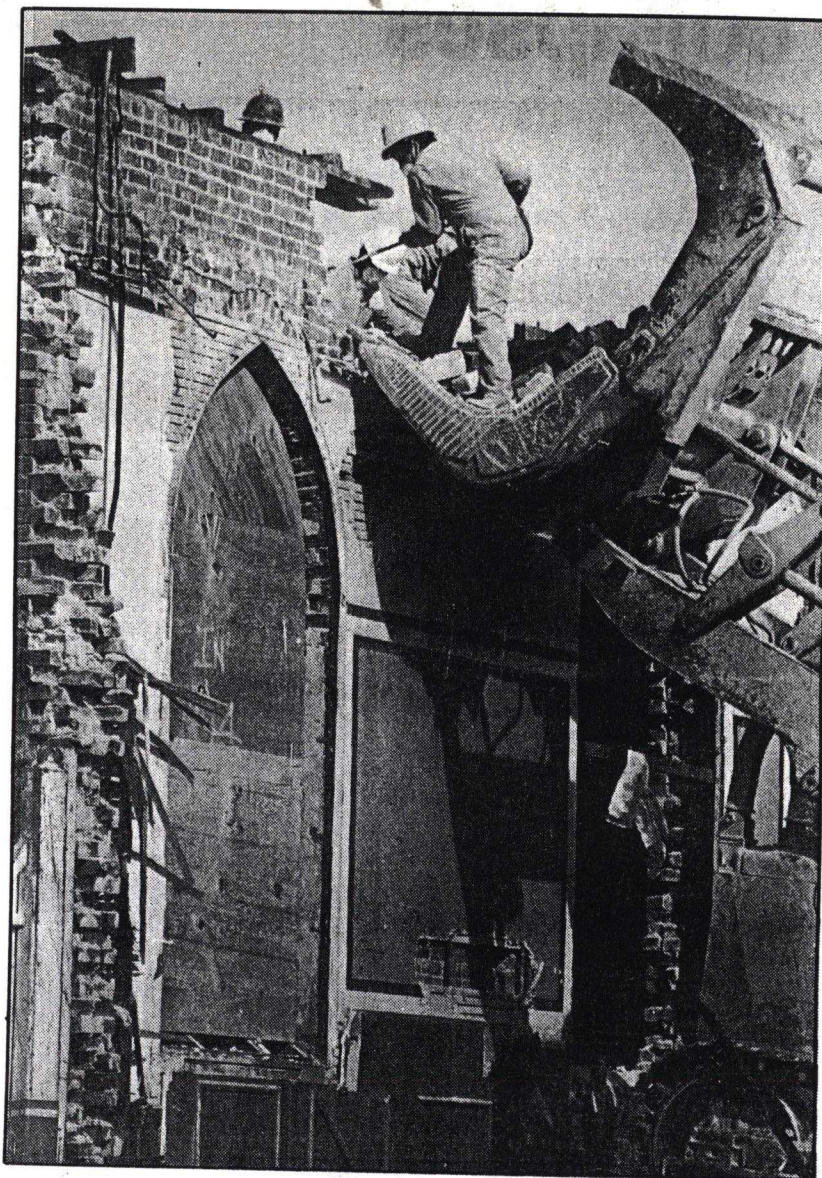
The church's ornate stained-glass windows were spared, and will return after some minor repairs, one of "just so many parables about things that were flexible being able to stand change and stand trauma," Miller said.

Tonight's service will include a celebration of Mass inside the old-new foundations of the church, weather permitting. Bishop Sylvester Ryan of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Monterey will be there, and a St. Patrick's Day dinner will follow at the Parish Hall across the street, the interim site of services since the earthquake.

Miller previewed a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy he'll read tonight.

"Now get this, this is the last part," Miller said. "Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children, and to your children's children. ..."

Miller's interpretation: "We'll be able to point to the church and tell our children, 'Once there was another church on that spot. It was beautiful and it was old and it was swept away by an earthquake down to its foundation and God helped us build it up again. ...'"



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

St. Patrick's was torn down brick by brick in November.

"And once there was a Watsonville that had never heard of an earthquake and was relatively free of problems and we were taken down to our foundation and God built us up again. ..."