The years following World War II witnessed a gradual, then massive, migration of Catholics from their traditional ethnic neighborhoods in the large cities in the northeastern United States to the developing suburbs. Left behind were magnificent churches and attendant parish facilities that had been built from the sacrificial offerings of immigrants. In time, the immigrants’ children and grandchildren who populated the suburbs became increasingly distanced from the urban centers with their old neighborhoods in the northeastern quadrant termed the “Rust Belt.” By the 1990s, canonical suppression of many of these once-vibrant urban parishes was underway in a number of cities, with the vacant churches sold or demolished. Other churches survived, but often precariously.

The third millennium has witnessed the utilization of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to produce “flash mobs” (events at which people would gather in a particular location, often for a seemingly spontaneous musical performance for onlookers) and “cash mobs” (flash mobs who spend money as a group at small, local businesses). Inspired by the success of these practices, Christopher Byrd of Buffalo decided to harness the idea to create a “Mass Mob” that would inspire suburban Catholics to attend Mass at selected inner-city churches and to become acquainted with the architectural heritage and history of churches that faced financial difficulties.

The effort began with the creation of a Facebook page for “Buffalo Mass Mob” in mid-April 2013.1 The first Mass Mob took place at St. Adalbert Basilica on November 2, 2013. The basilica was a logical choice since it had organized, just a few years earlier, a “Facebook Mass” encouraging its Facebook friends to come to a Sunday morning Mass. Electronic communication and social media — including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Meetup, and websites — would play a central role in spreading word about the Mass Mob event. Several hundred people attended.2 The Mass Mob concept was off and running in true grassroots fashion.

A February 2014 article by the Catholic News Agency3 spread the word to Catholics across the country. Mass Mobs popped up in Cleveland and Detroit. The Associated Press quickly carried the Buffalo story to the secular world,4 reaching many Catholics both practicing and non-practicing. The New York Times subsequently ran an article with a Cleveland dateline, which noted that a Byzantine Catholic church there had been mobbed.5 Variations of the original approach soon developed. Some were organic, led by laity. Others were clerical in character. The Detroit archdiocese fully participates; indeed Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit has recorded a video celebrating Mass mobs. The Knights of Columbus were involved in South Bend’s effort. Organizers ranged from priests to seminarians, deacons, and youth ministers. Even an ecumenical approach was tried. Popular, on-line, votes for the churches to be mobbed became the norm. Cleveland has mobbed on weekdays. Mobnings have taken place at churches that had been closed, and even sold to private entities. Some mob Masses were said by bishops. The movement spread to greater Cincinnati (Covington), Saint Louis, Memphis, and even Davenport with plans to mob rural churches. In some cities such as Philadelphia and New Orleans, initial efforts ended quickly. Yet, the phenomenon shows no signs of petering out; indeed The New York Times, in a January 2015 article, noted increased mobbing as the Archdiocese of New York prepared to close or merge 112 parishes.6

The organizers and the participants in all of these cities have focused on four simple objectives: select an historic Catholic church, attend Mass there, take a tour to learn about the church’s architecture and history, and provide needed financial support — while meeting other Catholics both at the Mass and at a subsequent social gathering at the church. As a tool of evangelization, the mobnings are drawing the participation of Catholics who had left the Church.

The Pittsburgh Mass Mob was organized in June 2014 after a local Catholic woman, Elizabeth Davis, noted the success that other cities with Mass Mob movements were experiencing.4 Reflecting Pittsburgh’s historic working class moniker — the Steel City — the local group adopted the phrase “Steeled in Faith” to identify the Pittsburgh Mass Mob.

With more than 200 members, these local Catholics have welcomed suggestions as to the selection of churches for monthly worship. The Pittsburgh group sought to highlight the beautiful historical churches in and around the city of Pittsburgh, and to provide financial support for these structures in older neighborhoods where population demographics have often witnessed significant population changes. These gatherings provide an opportunity for suburbanites to visit churches where their parents or grandparents were baptized or married. Experiencing the historic roots of the Catholic community in Pittsburgh also affords an opportunity to meet other like-minded Catholics.

The Pittsburgh Mass Mob

John C. Bates, Esq.

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The Pittsburgh Mass Mob (continued)

The Pittsburgh Mass Mob first met for Mass in July 2014 at Sacred Heart Church in Pittsburgh's Shadyside section. As of the date of this writing, the monthly mobbings have occurred (or are planned) as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>July 27, 2014</td>
<td>Sacred Heart Church</td>
<td>Shadyside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>August 24, 2014</td>
<td>St. Paul Cathedral</td>
<td>Oakland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>October 26, 2014</td>
<td>St. James Church</td>
<td>Wilkinsburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>November 16, 2014</td>
<td>St. Stephen Church</td>
<td>Hazelwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>December 28, 2014</td>
<td>Immaculate Heart of Mary Church</td>
<td>Polish Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>January 4, 2015</td>
<td>Church of the Epiphany</td>
<td>Lower Hill District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>February 22, 2015</td>
<td>St. Mary Church</td>
<td>Sharpsburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>March 21, 2015</td>
<td>St. Anthony Chapel</td>
<td>Troy Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>April 19, 2015</td>
<td>St. Stanislaus Kostka Church</td>
<td>Strip District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>May 24, 2015</td>
<td>St. Mary of the Mount Church</td>
<td>Mt. Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>June 21, 2015</td>
<td>Good Shepherd Church</td>
<td>Braddock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>July 19, 2015</td>
<td>St. Mary, Help of Christians Church</td>
<td>McKees Rocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>August 16, 2015</td>
<td>St. Augustine Church</td>
<td>Lawrenceville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>September 20, 2015</td>
<td>Saint Agnes Center of Carlow University</td>
<td>Oakland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV</td>
<td>October 4, 2015</td>
<td>St. Therese of Lisieux Church</td>
<td>Munhall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XVI</td>
<td>November 1, 2015</td>
<td>All Saints Church</td>
<td>Etna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These mobbings include a post-Mass tour of the church typically given by the parish’s pastor or a parish docent, followed by refreshments at a concluding social. The architectural styles and histories are many and varied, but the following brief comments will illustrate the rich histories of the churches that have comprised the Pittsburgh Mass Mob’s local program:

Sacred Heart Church in Shadyside is that parish’s second church, as designed by architect Carlton Strong and completed by architect Alfred Reid, Sr. It was constructed over several decades with completion of the church’s central tower in 1954. The church was designated a Historic Landmark in 1970.

St. Paul Cathedral is the third cathedral church of the diocese of Pittsburgh. Completed in 1906, it was designed in the decorated Gothic style by the architectural firm of James J. Egan and Charles H. Prindeville of Chicago. The cathedral was designated a Historic Landmark in 1970.³

St. James Church was designed by William P. Hutchins and completed in 1930. The 1,200 seat Gothic structure contains a 35-foot altar screen and Italian mosaic altar. Hand-carved oak statues and green marble columns from Genoa complement the sanctuary design. The parish celebrated its 145th anniversary in 2014. Msgr. Andrew A. Lambing, the legendary historian of the Pittsburgh diocese, served as pastor of this parish from 1885 until his death in 1918.

St. Stephen of Hungary Church was designed by the prolific architect Frederick Sauer and dedicated on December 20, 1925. A canopied high altar and magnificent stained glass windows highlight the sanctuary.

Immaculate Heart of Mary is an historic Polish parish, located in the heart of the Polish Hill neighborhood. Its Romanesque design by architect William P. Ginther was modeled on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The church, designated a Historic Landmark in 1970, was magnificently decorated for the Mass Mob gathering during the Christmas season.

The Church of the Epiphany was designed by architect Edward Stortz as a Romanesque church with Byzantine details. Its stained glass windows were the work of George Sotter. Interior design was the work of the famed Catholic architect John T. Comès. The church served as the pro-cathedral of the diocese in the three-year period (1903-1906) between closing of the second St. Paul Cathedral on Fifth Avenue (Downtown) and the opening of the third St. Paul Cathedral in Oakland. The church was designated a Historic Landmark in 1998. The parish’s early pastor, Fr. Lawrence O’Connell, served for a record 54 years (1905-1959).

St. Mary’s in Sharpsburg was dedicated on October 14, 1917 for its German ethnic congregation. It survived the St. Patrick’s Day Flood of 1936, when water reached the top of the pews. The twin-towered church contains a magnificent baldacchino over the high altar. Pope St. John Paul II beatified one of the church’s early pastors, Fr. Francisc Seelos, C.Ss.R., in 2002. The church is now part of the merged St. Juan Diego parish.

St. Anthony Chapel was built in 1880 (with an addition in 1892) by Fr. Suitbert Mollinger, pastor of nearby Most Holy Name of Jesus Church. This Belgian-born priest amassed the second largest collection of relics in the world, which is housed in this spectacularly decorated but intimately small chapel. The building was restored in the 1970s, with the late Society Board Member Mary Wohleber playing a lead role in that endeavor. The chapel was designated a Historic Landmark in 1968 and received City of Pittsburgh Historic Designation in 1977.
The Pittsburgh Mass Mob

St. Stanislaus Kostka Church dominates the Strip District. Designed by architect Frederick Sauer and opened in 1891 as the first Polish parish in the diocese of Pittsburgh, the church contains beautiful stained glass windows manufactured at the Royal Bavarian Institute. Designated a Historic Landmark in 1970, the church was added to the National Register of Historic Places two years later in 1972. Pope St. John Paul II visited this church when he was still Karol Cardinal Wojtyla.

St. Mary of the Mount Church, a brick Gothic structure designed by architect Frederick Sauer, was opened for service in 1896. The church, which occupies a commanding presence atop Mt. Washington, was designated a Historic Landmark in 1998.

Good Shepherd Church in Braddock is the former St. Michael the Archangel (Lithuanian) Church — a brick building in the Romanesque style, modest and unobtrusive, designed by Carlton Strong. While the current building was opened in 1930, its predecessor was the only safe meeting place for strikers during the Great Steel Strike of 1919 — and a Pennsylvania State Historic Marker notes the significance of the site. The current parish was created in 1985 as a merger of seven parishes.

A cathedral-style structure was built in McKees Rocks as St. Mary Help of Christians Church for a German parish established in 1855. William Ginther was commissioned to design the stone church with twin Gothic steeples and stained glass windows from Munich. In 1993, this parish was merged with six others to form St. John of God Parish.

Our Lady of the Angels parish was established in 1993 as a merger of four parishes. The sole surviving church in that merger is St. Augustine Church, which was built for the original German ethnic parish. Famed architect John T. Comès designed this brick German Romanesque structure, which was dedicated in 1901. The current parish and its predecessor have been served continuously by Franciscan Capuchin friars from the adjacent St. Augustine Monastery.

St. Agnes Church, dedicated in 1917, is a Lombard Romanesque basilica built in brick with stone trim and two belfries. The façade is dominated by a monumental arch that frames a rose window behind a Calvary group. Closed as a parish church in 1993, it is now the St. Agnes Center of Carlow University. The church was designated a Historic Landmark in 2000 and received a Pennsylvania State Historical Marker for architect John T. Comès in 2013.

St. Therese of Lisieux Church opened in 1958. It contains a chapel dedicated to the “Little Flower of Jesus.” Its stained glass windows depict scenes from both Old and New Testaments, as well as Pittsburgh. Mass Mob participants were offered the opportunity to partake in an outdoor procession, which was the culmination of a nine-day novena in honor of the church’s patronal saint.

All Saints Church is a brick and stone basilica-style church designed by architect Comès, with a large front porch of medieval design. The church, dedicated in 1915, was closed for six months to repair flooding damage from tropical storm Ivan in 2004. It was designated a Historic Landmark in 1997.

The Pittsburgh Mass Mob maintains a website, complete with photographs and historical details of these churches, at http://www.meetup.com/Pittsburgh-Mass-Mob/. In addition, the group has created a YouTube presence with its “Pittsburgh Mass Mob Church Tours” at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFnz7wE6wW-mwrQ-uNYz_BA. The group’s savvy use of modern media is reaching Catholics who would not otherwise be aware of the Mass Mob community. Like other Mass Mob communities, the Pittsburgh group’s evangelization is bringing back people to Mass and the sacramental life of the Church.

Endnotes

1 The Buffalo Mass Mob’s website appears at www.facebook.com/BuffaloMassMob.
6 A comprehensive national overview appears at the blog: http://clevelandmassmob.blogspot.com/2015/02/a-brief-history-and-meddlelsey-kids.html.
The Pittsburgh Mass Mob (continued)


12 A YouTube video tour of St. Mary Help of Christians Church appears at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY23yoeSX_c.


15 A YouTube video tour of St. Therese of Lisieux Church appears at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmZ_AiKzRG1

16 An excellent analysis of the spiritual impact of Mass Mobs was offered by Carolyn Pirtle, Assistant Director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy, on October 12, 2014 at her blog: http://blogs.nd.edu/oblation/2014/10/20/mass-mobs-the-ultimate-flash-mob/.

St. Augustine
Courtesy of John C. Bates.

St. Anthony’s Chapel
Courtesy of John C. Bates.