



## Faith Full Circle: St. Malachi and St. Patrick's Next Chapter

Throughout the last decade, the late Francis McGarry shared stories of Cleveland's Irish neighborhoods through this column, often reminding us that St. Patrick's and St. Malachi weren't just churches—they were spiritual homes, cornerstones of faith and identity for generations of Irish Clevelanders.

Francis called them “bookends of the Irish West Side,” places where Irish immigrants, and their descendants, found belonging, whether lighting candles at St. Malachi’s “lighthouse of the Flats” or gathering at St. Patrick’s on Bridge for St. Patrick’s Day Mass.

Now, these two historic parishes have come full circle - through a collaboration, not a traditional merger. On April 27, 2025, St. Malachi was designated as an oratory of St. Patrick Parish - a term unfamiliar to many Catholics but representing a distinct and honored category in Church law.

### What is an Oratory?

An oratory is a sacred space dedicated for worship that is not a parish church but retains full sacramental life. Unlike a chapel, which may be limited to certain ceremonies, an oratory can host all sacraments including baptisms, weddings, and funerals, with its own appointed clergy.

Oratories date back to early Christianity, when believers gathered for prayer at places of special significance. Now officially part of St. Patrick Parish through what Church



The St. Malachi Run

documents refer to as an “extinctive union,” St. Malachi as an oratory maintains its unique character while gaining stability for the future.

St. Patrick’s, known as the “mother church” of Cleveland’s West Side Irish community, was founded in 1853 to serve Irish immigrants settling in Ohio City and the Flats. In 1865, St. Malachi was established as a new parish less than a mile away, bringing Catholic services closer to the workers living in the nearby industrial district known as the Old Angle. For generations, these churches were cornerstones of Irish Catholic life - hosting packed Masses, bustling schools, and playing pivotal roles in community events.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, both parishes faced new challenges. St. Malachi weathered steep declines in local membership as the Flats transformed from a working-class neighborhood to an industrial and now gentrifying area. By 2022, the parish initiated its own strategic planning process, anticipating the need for a new model of sustainability.

“This was about adjacency,

heritage, and practicality,” said Christy Bartley, a member of the St. Patrick’s staff. “Some of the language used in the decrees, like ‘extinctive union,’ may sound harsh, but what it really means is that St. Malachi Church remains open as an oratory, with all its sacraments and ministries continuing, but now within the St. Patrick Parish community.”

St. Malachi has a rich history of transformation. The church building that stands today replaced the original structure that tragically burned down on Christmas Eve in 1943. In previous decades, it housed both the territorial parish of St. Malachi and the non-territorial “Community of St. Malachi,” a lay-driven faith community focused on social justice. These two merged during earlier diocesan restructuring, creating a parish with a strong tradition of lay leadership and service.

“What attracted me to St. Malachi years ago was that the need was on our doorsteps, you didn’t have to go anywhere to serve,” explains Sharon Lowe-Chapman, a member of St. Malachi for 33 years. “The music, the



St. Malachi’s “lighthouse of the Flats”

charisma, the ministries, the social justice issues were all kind of what got me there.”

Today, that mission of service continues. The church operates numerous outreach programs,







#### Saturday Morning Breakfast

including their Back Door Ministry providing daily meals Monday through Friday, a Monday Night Meal program, and a unique Saturday Morning Breakfast with eight rotating volunteer groups from across the community—including St. Malachi members, St. Ignatius and St. Edward students, Hibernians, and St. Malachi Run participants.

This spirit of service has not gone unnoticed. According to members involved in the planning process, when considering the future of St. Malachi, Bishop Edward Malesic was adamant that closing was never an option. The diocese recognized St. Malachi's renowned reputation for caring for the vulnerable and serving those in need. Parish

leaders shared that the bishop expressed how St. Malachi's outreach work serves as an example that other parishes throughout the diocese should emulate.

In the words of Sharon Lowe-Chapman, who has organized the St. Malachi Run for years: "It's not about the building, it's about the ministry and serving the people. The charismatic warmth of the liturgies and the ministries will continue."

St. Patrick's contributes its own deep heritage to this collaboration. Its magnificent sanctuary stands as testament to the devotion of early Irish immigrants who, as Sharon Lowe-Chapman recounts, "would rotate working on the church for three weeks while other Irish

families financially supported them and fed them." Today, like St. Malachi, it draws parishioners from far beyond its neighborhood boundaries who seek its sense of community and tradition.

As the two communities navigate this transition, they've adopted "unique and united" as their guiding principle, acknowledging that like a good marriage, they will maintain their individual identities while working together toward common goals.

This thoughtful approach to collaboration could offer valuable lessons for other parishes facing similar challenges. The implementation teams were thorough in their preparation, researching comparable arrangements across the country.

"We contacted churches with similar patterns to what we have in Boston, Brooklyn, and Pennsylvania," explains Jan Durkalski, Chairperson of Parish Council. "We did extensive research, talked with them, and received their parish guidelines to create the best model going forward."

New initiatives are already sprouting from this partnership. A Holy Night Hike that included both St. Patrick and St. Malachi as featured stops brought together Catholics and non-Catholics from all around Northeast Ohio, including from both faith communities. The annual Songs for the Soul concert at St. Malachi welcomes neighbors with music and fellowship. And this summer, they'll combine their traditional outdoor Masses for a joint celebration.

As Cleveland's near west side continues to evolve with new housing and changing demographics, these two historic Irish churches are adapting to serve both longtime faithful and newcomers. Their collaboration ensures that the beacon of St. Malachi's green cross, once a guiding light for sailors, and St. Patrick's towering presence will continue to offer spiritual harbor for generations to come. "This is a community that has been doing the hard work of social justice and hospitality for decades," Bartley

said. "That work continues."

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*\*Vaiva Neary is a lifelong resident of Cleveland, with a Bachelor's Degree in Education from John Carroll University and a Master's Degree in Literacy Development & Instruction from Cleveland State University. She is an English as a Second Language instructor in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Vaiva is a member of IACES and a founding member of the LAOH Deirfiur Division. She can be reached at [vaivaneary@gmail.com](mailto:vaivaneary@gmail.com).*

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