



PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

## Newport church where JFK married Jackie needs a face lift



Charles Kenahan, capital campaign chairman, surveys exterior damage at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Newport, R.I. Top: the church's Kennedy wedding portrait.

By Dan McGowan  
GLOBE COLUMNIST

NEWPORT, R.I. — When Father Mark Sauriol arrived here four years ago, the iconic St. Mary's Church where John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier exchanged wedding vows needed both a pick-me-up and a face lift.

So Sauriol went to work building community, hosting regular spaghetti dinners and coffee hours after every Mass. The church unlocked its doors and welcomed all worshipers each day. And Sauriol allowed Catholics from any parish to walk down the same aisle as the Kennedys, after years of weddings being only for existing parishioners.

"I'm blessed as a priest to come into a church where my parishioners are passionate about their faith," Sauriol told me. "But I'm just catching them coming off of COVID, and the community over the years kind of waned a little bit. For lack of a better term, I think they see me as a party planner."

Call it divine hospitality — it worked.

Rhode Island's oldest Catholic parish is bustling again. Sunday Mass is crowded, the church is hosting 40 weddings a year — Sauriol himself officiates 30 of them — and volunteers are everywhere. On a breezy recent Wednesday afternoon, more than 80 needy Newporters were served a warm lunch in the cafeteria.

Now that he's revived the parish's spirit, Sauriol is ready to focus on the church's physical restoration.

St. Mary's has launched a \$5 million capital campaign ahead of its bicentennial in 2028 — the first stone at the current church was laid in 1848 — largely for desperately needed upgrades to the

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# Kennedy wedding site needs face lift

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building's exterior. There's also a plan to improve ADA compliance and install air conditioning.

The most pressing need is a restoration to the stone on the north side of the church, which is cracking and crumbling on a regular basis, according to Charles Kenahan, who is chairing the capital campaign. He said every day parishioners walk around the building and collect debris that has fallen from the facade.

It's not that the church is falling apart, Sauriol insists, but it clearly needs some TLC.

In addition to roof and siding repairs, some of the aging brownstone needs to be replaced — which presents a unique challenge. The church is built of coursed brownstone from Connecticut, which is no longer available. But Kenahan said composite material will help St. Mary's maintain its architectural integrity.

In case you were wondering, the doors that the newlywed Kennedys walked through onto Spring Street in 1953 will remain intact, and St. Mary's still uses the kneelers from the Camelot wedding.

Sauriol said the Kennedy mystique is as present as ever, and he acknowledged that it helps bring notoriety to St. Mary's. He said he's proud to welcome people of all religions from around the world who want to see where the wedding took place.

"There's a whole layer of Americana," Sauriol said. "You know why people from all over come here? Because he was their president too."

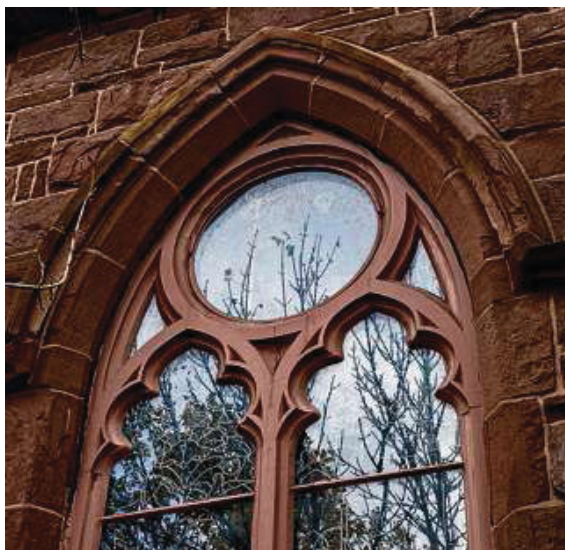
In a moment where the country is bitterly divided over politics, Sauriol's goal is to welcome everyone.

"I'm not a political preacher," he said. "This isn't rocket science. My emphasis is preaching the gospel. I feel like my job is to give people hope."

St. Mary's is already more than halfway to its \$5 million goal, but Sauriol and Kenahan did say they have bigger ambi-



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A capital campaign is looking to raise at least \$5 million for upgrades to the exterior of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church (top), also known as Our Lady of the Isle. Damage to the aged stone is evident above a window (left) and debris (above) is frequently collected around the exterior.

tions over the long term. A full renovation of the church could cost nearly \$20 million, and they acknowledged they've had conversations with potential private donors about a larger campaign.

Sauriol said he didn't want to overwhelm parishioners with a larger request for financial support, but he said he's working on 10- and 20-year plans.

For good reason.

One recent survey at St. Mary's found that 23 percent of parishioners started attending the church within the last five years. The church now publishes a pamphlet on its history in English, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, and German. The word is out, and Sauriol hopes to keep the momentum going.

Kenahan agreed.

"We are getting a sense that perhaps there are people who want to make a lasting change here," Kenahan said. "This is a generational moment for St. Mary's and for Newport."

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