December 13, 2024

Hon. Eric Adams, Mayor
New York City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair, Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Request for Evaluation of Most Holy Redeemer Church and Rectory (165-173 East 3rd Street) and School (198-202 East 4th Street), Borough of Manhattan, Block 399, Lot 11

Dear Mayor Eric Adams and Chair Sarah Carroll,

We are writing to request that the Most Holy Redeemer church complex, including the church and rectory at 165-173 East 3rd Street and the school at 198-202 East 4th Street, together comprising block 399, lot 11, be considered for designation as a New York City individual landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Located between Avenues A and B in Manhattan, the Roman Catholic Church of the Most Holy Redeemer was founded by the Redemptorist Fathers in 1844 to serve New York City's sizable German immigrant population in the area of the East Village that was then known as *Kleindeutschland*, or "Little Germany."

The congregation worshiped out of a temporary sanctuary-plus-school building for several years, until a permanent church, rectory, and school were constructed in 1851-52. Designed by German architect Joseph Walch (alternatively listed in city directories as Johannas Walsh or "Mr. Walsh"), the new, monumental ecclesiastical building was one of the largest churches in New York City at the time of its completion.

The main church building was originally designed in the Byzantine Revival style with red brick facades, with a three-story rectory to its east, connected to the nave via an enclosed one-story gallery. The symmetrical primary facade of the church was divided into thirds by four prominent pilasters,

with a wide, deeply recessed central entrance flanked by two nearly identical, but narrower, entryways. The original bell tower, topped by a spire and cross, reached 250 feet high, looming over an otherwise low density streetscape of mostly three- and four-story row houses and tenements.

Most Holy Redeemer, circa 1875

Sketch of the original Byzantine Revival facades, spire, gallery, and rectory at right (undated)

The building's highly ornate facade often led to it being mistaken for a cathedral rather than a parish church. When it first opened, *The Evening World* described the church as "the most imposing edifice of its kind in the country," and "a magnificent monument of ecclesiastical architecture."

A school building was erected directly behind the church, with its main entrances facing East 4th Street. The four-story-plus-basement school features red brick throughout its primary (East 4th Street) facade, and its rear facade abuts the church.

Minor interior alterations to the main church building occurred in 1884 when Father Andrew Ziegler, the newly appointed pastor, added new marble flooring, altars, and a communion railing to the already ornate sanctuary, which featured original intricate stonework and statuary crafted by German artisans. In 1892, the bones of the martyr St. Daeianus were donated by a private chapel in Italy, and laid to rest within the church. Other important figures are interred in the crypt located directly beneath the church, including the remains of 85 Redemptorist priests and brothers.

198-202 East 4th Street, Most Holy Redeemer School Building, 1940s tax photograph

198-202 East 4th Street, Most Holy Redeemer School Building, Google Maps 2024

In 1913, architect Paul Schultz was commissioned to modernize the church and rectory. He resurfaced the exterior facades with granite and Indiana limestone, which is as it appears today. The configuration of the primary facade of the church, including its three prominent round-arched entrances, was retained, and elaborate Romanesque Revival-style architectural details added. The entrances, featuring incised archivolts, are flanked by rounded niches carved into the substantial piers.

Primary facade of the Most Holy Redeemer today

Above the doorways, double-height masonry openings, similarly recessed and with semicircular arches that mirror those of the grand first floor entrances, feature paired, arched stained glass windows set between slim Corinthian columns. The center opening is topped with a rose window, while the two side openings feature simpler circular windows above their arched stained glass. The resulting somewhat eclectic design of the church is a mix of the original Baroque Romanesque design and the Byzantine Revival-style features dating to this early 1900s renovation.

The rectory was extended to four stories tall, also in 1913, and its primary facade and that of the gallery connector were faced with rough-hewn granite. Paired, arched windows at both the gallery and rectory were enframed in smooth limestone that matches the finish of the main facades of the church, introducing visual continuity across the buildings. The rectory and gallery both feature bracketed limestone cornices.


Rectory (at right), gallery (at center), and church (at left), November 13, 2024

Though Schultz shortened the original steeple to 232 feet, the tower remains a prominent central feature of the church building, with clock faces on all three visible sides, topped by a hexagonal copper-domed belfry and gold cross. The tower continues to define the skyline in this area of the East Village. It was most recently restored in 2023, with its 1913 details retained.

Origins of the Parish of the Most Holy Redeemer in New York City

A small band of Redemptorist Fathers, a congregation of missionary priests and deacons, first traveled from Vienna to New York City in 1832, endeavoring to establish a church for the growing German-speaking Catholic population in the city, who had no permanent place of worship in their new home. These first Redemptorists returned to Europe shortly thereafter, but a subsequent group arrived in 1841, among them Father Gabriel Rumpler, who promptly gave Mass at St. Nicholas German Catholic Church, or *Deutsche Römisch-Katholische St. Nicholas Kirche*, which once stood at 127 East 2nd Street, one block south of what would become the Most Holy Redeemer site. The St. Nicholas parish had originally been founded in 1833 by the Austrian-born Father Johann Stephen Raffeiner, and was the very first German-language Catholic parish in New York City (the building was demolished in 1960 for a parking lot).

Just a few years after the establishment of St. Nicholas German Catholic Church, the parish of the Most Holy Redeemer was founded to serve a German-speaking population that had already outgrown the capacity of just one congregation. The Fathers erected a temporary school, rectory, and church all in a single building on East 3rd Street in 1844. Dedicated by Coadjutor Bishop John McCloskey on April 8, 1844, the entire complex had taken a mere seven weeks to complete. The school opened at once and lessons were taught in both German and English.
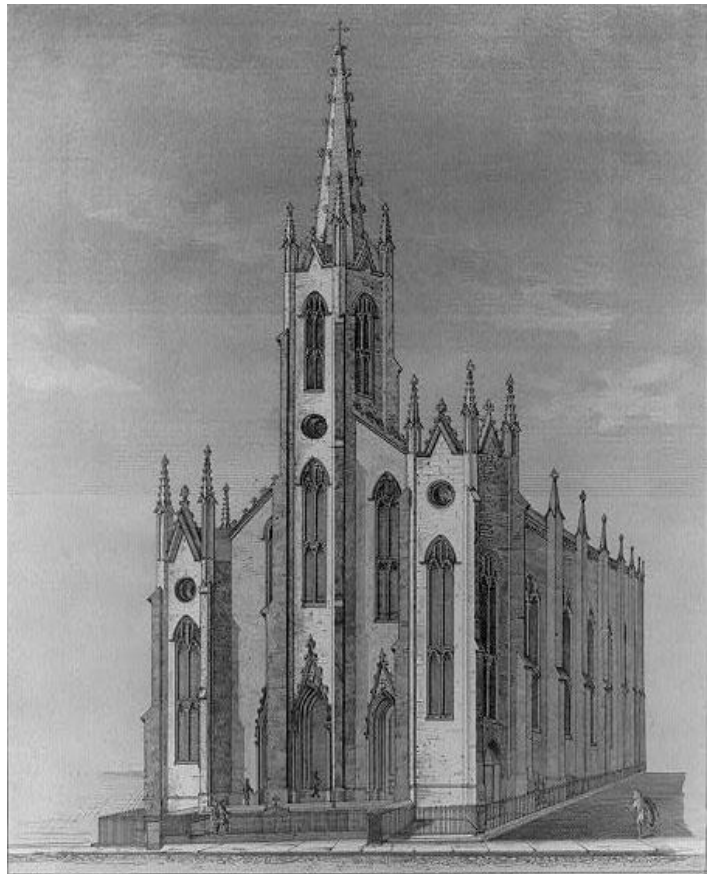
Sketch of St. Nicholas German Catholic Church (121 E 2nd Street, between First Avenue and Avenue A), no longer extant

Establishing a Permanent Home for Most Holy Redeemer

John Hughes, an Irish-born bishop who was involved in protecting New York City's Catholic churches from anti-Catholic sentiment, became New York's first archbishop on July 19, 1850. That same year, plans were laid for a "more substantial building" for the Most Holy Redeemer, as described by *The Evening World.* Further cementing the Catholic community's permanence in New York City, the archbishop would announce his plans for St. Patrick's Cathedral just a few years later, the cornerstone of which was laid in 1858.

The first report on the new Church of the Most Holy Redeemer building was published on October 29, 1850, by the *New-York Daily Tribune*: "...The parish attached to the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer (Roman Catholic) in Third-street, are breaking ground for the erection of their new church, on the lots immediately adjoining the temporary edifice in which they have hitherto worshiped, and which has long been insufficient in size for the people who worship there. The new church is to be on a grand scale, and is to be completed in proportion as there are funds to advance it with."

The historic interior featured colorful stenciling. Lithograph by Packard and Butler, from the collection of the Favey Library, Villanova University.

Construction for the church, rectory, and schoolhouse was completed within two years, and the church was dedicated on November 28, 1852, consecrated by Archbishop Hughes. Bishop Neumann, D.D., C.SS.R., of Philadelphia (who, in 1977, became the first male citizen of the United States to be canonized as a saint), Bishop McCloskey of Albany, Bishop Whelan of Wheeling, and Bishop Mosque of Bogota were all in attendance. In 1864, Reverend Leopold Petsch procured the state incorporation for the Most Holy Redeemer, under the title of "The Mission Society of the Most Holy Redeemer in the State of New York."

The congregation, and associated school, continued to grow. In 1883, tragedy struck when a fire at the school, located directly behind the church building on East 4th Street, caused the death of 16 children when a rush of students, reacting to the smoke and fire, led to a crush of bodies unable to escape the building. This devastating accident had profound impacts upon regulatory regimes in the city, spurring the implementation of fire safety reforms such as first-time requirements for fire escapes, wider stairwells, and unlocked doors and doors that open outward for fire escape routes at schools citywide. Such requirements remain in effect to this day.

A more positive 'first' occurred during Most Holy Redeemer's 60th anniversary mass on April 24, 1904. Pope Pius X had recently ordered that Gregorian chant was to replace classical and Baroque melodies in the Catholic Church, and *The Sun* reported that the Most Holy Redeemer service was "the first complete Gregorian programme to be used in this country since the Pope issued his encyclical on the reform of music."

Most Holy Redeemer was also at the forefront of technological advancements for church buildings in the United States. In February of 1894, it had become one of the first churches, if not the first, to have electric lighting installed throughout its interior. Another innovation took place when, in January 1914,

parishioner, electrical mechanic, and inventor John Rebeschung strung wires from the sacristy to the bell tower, making it the possible first church in the world to utilize electric bell ringing.

At the turn of the last century, the German population in the neighborhood was declining rapidly, and immigrants from other countries were starting to settle in this area of the East Village in large numbers. By the second half of the 20th century, Spanish-speaking Catholics formed the majority of the Most Holy Redeemer congregation, and today, the church is popularly known as *Iglesia Santisomo Rendentor-Natividad*. Francis Cardinal Spellman designated the church a Pilgrimage Shrine in honor of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in 1966, which lent it international fame. In 2018, the Redemptorist Order withdrew from the parish, which is now administered by priests of the Archdiocese of New York.

Most Holy Redeemer is a significant and unique example of Romanesque Revival style ecclesiastical architecture in New York City. It stands out among the historic tenements and row houses of the East Village, and remains an important lasting reminder of the once-prominent German-speaking Catholic population in the area. The other church that served this population was demolished in 1960, and it is critical that Most Holy Redeemer be protected for both its architectural and cultural heritage, as the only extant example of these layered histories in the neighborhood.
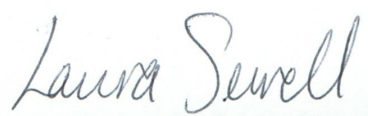
Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director
Village Preservation

Richard D. Moses
President
Lower East Side
Preservation Initiative

Laura Sewell
Executive Director
East Village Community Coalition

Cc: NYC Council Member Carlina Rivera
        NYS Senator Brian Kavanagh
        NYS Assemblymember Harvey Epstein
        The New York Landmarks Conservancy
        Historic Districts Council
        The Municipal Art Society of New York