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- Restoration of log church in Sawyer at the intersection of history, faith, evangelization

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Efforts are under way to restore a historic log church in Sawyer — one of the oldest buildings remaining in northern Minnesota, and one of great significance to its Catholic Native American community.

Known as Guardian Angel Mission Church, “The Church in the Woods” or simply the Sawyer Log Church, the site is “situated on a grass covered knoll at the edge of a hardwood forest,” as the church’s website describes it. The only other building visible from the site is the adjacent Sts. Mary and Joseph Church that was built in 1969.

Near the church is a shrine to St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American saint. The shrine has recently been rebuilt and now houses a digital copy of a canvas painting of her by a Father Ysermans, OSC, created sometime in the 1930s, the original of which is in the adjacent church. Sts. Mary and Joseph also contains a restored centerpiece from the log church altar and a statue of St. Kateri that was blessed by Bishop Paul Sirba.



The basic structure of the Sawyer Log Church was built in 1884, and it is one of the oldest structures in the area around Cloquet. The church also has a shrine to St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the first canonized Native American saint. (Submitted photo)

The log church itself has roots going back to the 1880s; it replaced a “large wigwam structure that had been built when Father Vogt came to the Fond du Lac Native American community in the 1880s,” officials say. The Catholic faith had been present at least since then-Father Frederic Baraga’s first visit in 1835 — he went on to be the first bishop of Marquette, Michigan, and has been declared venerable as part of his cause for canonization. But the log church in Sawyer was the first church or chapel there.

It’s one of the few remaining historic buildings in Carlton County, in part because of the widespread destruction of the Cloquet fire in 1918. The structure was built by Chippewa parishioners in 1884 on land reportedly made available by Angus Robideau, a Chippewa with French ancestry. Moses Posey, a Chippewa and elder in the church, is credited with building the basic structure.

The congregation was encouraged in this building effort by Father Vogt who began his ministry to the Native American community in Sawyer in 1882.

The building thus sits at an intersection of church history, state and regional history and history for the Native American community in the region.

The log church is noted for its beauty, craftsmanship and engineering, and for its beautiful setting, but officials say the log structure and concrete foundation need repair if the historic building is to be shared with future generations.

Donations are being sought and gratefully accepted for this effort. For more information, visit www.stkaterisawyer.com or call Sts. Mary and Joseph Church at (218) 384-4563.

— *The Northern Cross*