Lady Queen of Peace completes its journey to rebuilt church

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Our Lady Queen of Peace has been reborn from the ashes.

In April 2010, a fire in a storage area near the church's balcony destroyed almost all of the interior. The church was unusable, and parishioners instead had weekly Masses in the gym of Truman Montessori, a nearby elementary school.

On Sunday, parishioners celebrated Mass for one last time before walking back from the gym to their rebuilt church after a renovation project costing more than $1 million.

"It's an ending and a beginning," said parishioner Anne Sonnier. "Last year at this time, we talked about it being the last Christmas in the gym, and now it's come to fruition. Our prayers were answered."

The Rev. Hampton Davis, the church's pastor, said the rebuilding process was the result of financial donations, volunteer work from parishioners, the community and benefactors from around the country. About 600 to 800 families are included in the church family, he said.

Davis said parishioners had worshipped in the gym before, for five years after the parish was formed in 1969. He said it seemed natural to go back there.

"It's been a real adventure," Davis said. "After the fire, we began to think of where we could worship, and we thought of our first home. We felt so grateful that we were given permission to go back there. On Sunday, we are doing what they did 35 years ago, which is to walk from the gym to the church. It's been a challenge, but we're just grateful for all of the support."

Sonnier said the community pulled together after the fire.

"Someone donated portable air conditioner units and fans because the gym is not air-conditioned," she said. "The church would get set up on Friday or Saturday afternoon, and all the chairs are set up for a regular Mass. Our pastor ... was able to set up a wonderful sound system."

Architect Kevin Goslen and builder J.B. Mouton led the project as donations continued to pour in, she said. Sonnier said parishioners were touched by a building dedication in January 2011.

"Several of the things that were damaged in the fire have been re-purposed, and several items have been cleaned and renovated," she said. "There's been a lot of re-purposing and recycling."

Davis said one special moment was the unveiling of a steeple and cross on top of the church in October.

Returning to the church for services has been emotional for many of the parishioners.

"I think for those who have been here all their lives, it's going to be a marvelous renewal," Davis said. "There's a song in gospel, 'We've Come This Far by Faith,' and I think that's absolutely what has happened. Those who have stayed with us have grown closer to each other and closer to God."

The first Mass at the renovated church will be today for Christmas Eve, Davis said.