A Symbol of Resilience: The Prayerful Hands of Mary, Queen and Mother

Michael P. Gaspar¹ Jonathan P. Gaspar² Patrick S. Gaspar³

¹Department of Orthopedic Surgery, The Philadelphia Hand Center, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States

²Advanced Therapeutic Endoscopy, Gastrointestinal Specialists Inc (GSI), Richmond, Virginia, United States

³Department of Anesthesiology, Harborside Surgical Center, Oxon Hill, Maryland, United States

Address for correspondence Michael P. Gaspar, MD, Department of Orthopedic Surgery, The Philadelphia Hand Center, Thomas Jefferson University, 834 Chestnut Street, The Franklin, Suite G114, Philadelphia, PA 19107, United States (e-mail: michaelpgaspar@gmail.com).

J Hand Microsurg 2017;9:51–53.

On February 16 and 17 in 1899, a devastating fire raged through a shared block of Market and 13th streets, of what is today known as Center City, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States. Among the buildings damaged was Saint John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church, originally built in April 1832. While attempting to combat the flames, three firemen, William J. Chance, Hugh Duffy, and George W. Steinle were killed as a building wall collapsed on them,

Fig. 1 Reproduction of a black-and-white photograph taken days after the fire in February 1899. Note the white statue of the Immaculate Mary in the background to the left.

A

B

Fig. 2 (A) Photograph of the full height of the statue as it stands today. (B) Note the missing distal ends of both small fingers.

received

January 19, 2017

accepted after revision

February 23, 2017

published online

April 4, 2017

© 2017 Society of Indian Hand & Microsurgeons

DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.1055/s-0037-1601330>.
ISSN 0974-3227.

and a fourth, James Shea, passed away 2 weeks later from pneumonia contracted while fighting the fire.

Although the inner church was not spared from the ravaging effects of the inferno, the pristine white marble statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary stood tall amidst the charred rubble and remains in the same location over one century later (►Fig. 1). Saint John's remains a cornerstone of Catholic history not just in Philadelphia, but in the entire United States.¹ The Immaculate Mary is depicted with her hands folded in the sign of prayer² draped with a gold-colored rosary (►Fig. 2A). Despite fires and multiple church renovations, the statue remains virtually unchanged save for two small differences; distal ends of her two small

fingers are missing, the cause of which remains unknown (►Fig. 2B).

More than a full century removed from the tragic fire, St. John's now hosts an annual memorial mass honoring those four fallen firemen, as well as those who have since lost their lives in the line of duty (►Figs. 3–5). This February in 2017, the church will celebrate its 10th annual Firefighters' Memorial Mass, just 10 days before welcoming the Easter season with Ash Wednesday services. As a symbol of togetherness and resilience, many gather in front of the statue of the Immaculate Mary, with their hands folded like hers in prayer, remembering the city's fallen, heroes.

St. John the Evangelist Church
Invites all Firefighters and Friends of the Fire Service
to join us at our annual
Firefighters Memorial Mass
Saturday, February 16th, 2013 at 10 AM
21 South 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA
Followed by a Reception in the New Parish House

Firefighters hold a special place in the hearts of the members of St. John the Evangelist Church parish...

This goes all the way back to 1899 when the Church fell victim to fire and four members of the Philadelphia Fire Department gave their lives trying to save it.

On the night of February 16, 1899, fire broke out and burned through the night, destroying many buildings in the area of 13th and Market Streets. St. John the Evangelist Church was spared but the Rectory was heavily damaged. As they fought the fire, Hugh Duffy, William Chance and George Steinle, all members of Engine 32, were killed when a burning wall fell and crushed them to death. Two weeks later, James Shea, from Chemical Engine Co. No. 1, died from pneumonia, which he contracted while fighting the fire. The fire re-ignited early on the morning of February 17, 1899 and destroyed much of the church, with the exception of the Blessed Virgin statue, which remained untouched.

St. John the Evangelist Church
Supports
Philadelphia Firefighters and Paramedics!

Fig. 3 Flyer for the 2013 Annual Memorial Mass for Firefighters.

Fig. 4 Photograph of the poster that is displayed at the Annual Memorial Mass for Firefighters with reproduction of the newspaper clipping of those lost in the fire.

Fig. 5 Philadelphia servicemen align in preparation for the procession into the church while the presiding pastor hands out fresh cut roses to those in attendance.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Friar John Daya, OFM, for his helpful insight in preparing this letter.

References

- 1 Warren RA. Displaced 'Pan-Americans and the Transformation of the Catholic Church in Philadelphia, 1789–1850.' Miller TG. Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography. Philadelphia, PA: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania; 2004;128(4): 343–366
- 2 Ram AN, Chung KC. Study of hand signs in Judeo-Christian art. J Hand Surg Am 2008;33(7):1182–1188