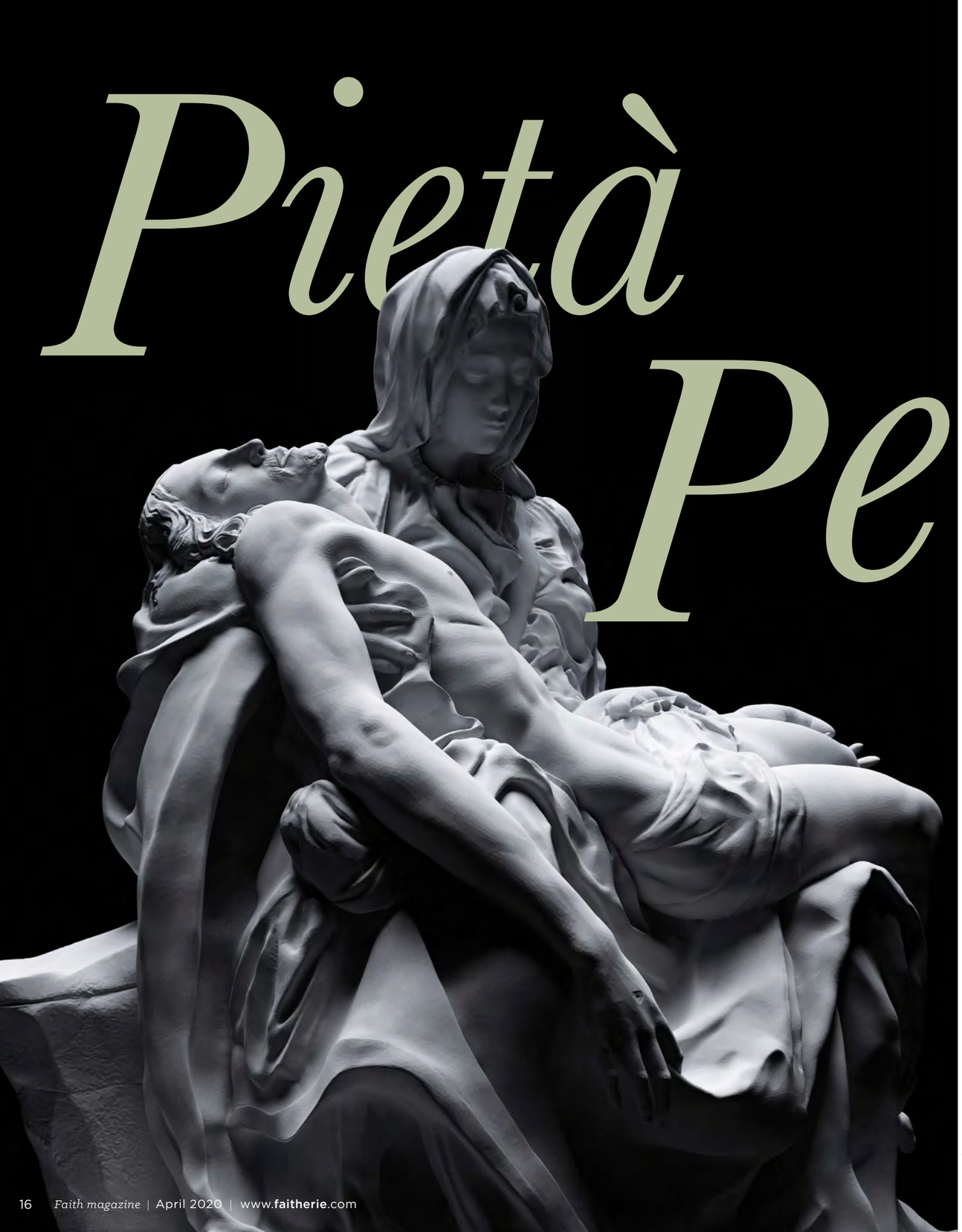

Getty Images/ gjko

Pietà Perfection

Statue's restoration reveals chemistry of art

BY ANNE-MARIE WELSH

Forty-eight years ago this May, a man suffering from mental illness took a hammer into a chapel of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican and bludgeoned Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

Some onlookers jumped a railing and tackled the attacker, but he already had managed to deliver more than a dozen destructive blows to the iconic statue. Others scrambled to scoop up souvenirs among the crumbled bits of precious marble that scattered onto the floor of the basilica.

It was a scene depicting the best and worst of humanity, all at the foot of the grieving — now literally broken — Blessed Mother holding her dead son, Jesus.

Shockwaves from the attack reverberated around the world. Created by Michelangelo in 1499, the statue is among the most recognizable and revered sculptures in art history. [See sidebar on *pietà* statues in the Diocese of Erie.]

At the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, 27 million visitors viewed the *Pietà* in the Vatican Pavilion. The statue had sailed across the Atlantic on the deck of the *Cristoforo Colombo* ocean liner — wrapped in a crate that was suspended in another box and placed in a third container designed to float, should the boat have sunk. The statue's U.S. visit was an immediate triumph, quickly becoming the fair's most popular feature.

The small cadre of men responsible for the care and maintenance of artwork at the Vatican were deeply saddened by the news of the 1972 attack. For these workers, including the 34-year-old biochemist Dr. Nazzareno Gabrielli, restoration of the *Pietà* was life-altering.

Today, Gabrielli is 81 and the last surviving member of the team of artists and scientists in charge of restoring the *Pietà*. He recently spoke in Rome with *Faith* magazine.

"Some of us were at a conference at the Archaeological Museum of Florence when we heard the news," Dr. Gabrielli remembers. "We obviously felt very bad and were very saddened, above all, for a statue so beautiful — the first of the young Michelangelo."

Artists, restorers and scientists around the world had strong opinions about what needed to be done. Some felt the *Pietà* should be left in its damaged state as a commentary on modern violence. Others thought it could be partially fixed, leaving the hammer markings as a visible reminder of the incident.

The third option was radical, from the perspective of those working in the field: repair the statue completely. Those involved with the restoration at the Vatican believed the situation called for innovative thinking.

"In the end, it was not a statue in a museum," Gabrielli says. "It was right in St. Peter's Basilica. It was an object of devotion and certainly could not remain mutilated."

Thus began a seven-month process of discussion, study, practice and, finally, complete restoration under the guidance and direction of Dr. Vittorio Federici. The project, Gabrielli says, would ultimately restore the Madonna to the faithful.

But early in the process, team members were not always in agreement on how to proceed.

"You know how men are," Gabrielli says. [There were no women on the restoration team.] "Everybody wants to be

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the one who has the right idea, who stands out."

At the time of the restoration, Gabrielli was the youngest member of the group. Now a retired professor, he remembers a moment in which he was able to steer his colleagues in the right direction.

"I recall getting very angry," he says. "I called them together and I said, 'Listen, if you want to do the restoration and complete it in a reasonable amount of time, each of us must be enamored not with our own work, but with the work of each other.'"

The truth of his words was undeniable. From that point forward, Gabrielli says, "we worked together as one."

Once the team decided to fully restore the *Pietà*, Gabrielli spent several months experimenting in the lab. He drew upon his biochemistry knowledge acquired at the Sapienza University of Rome.

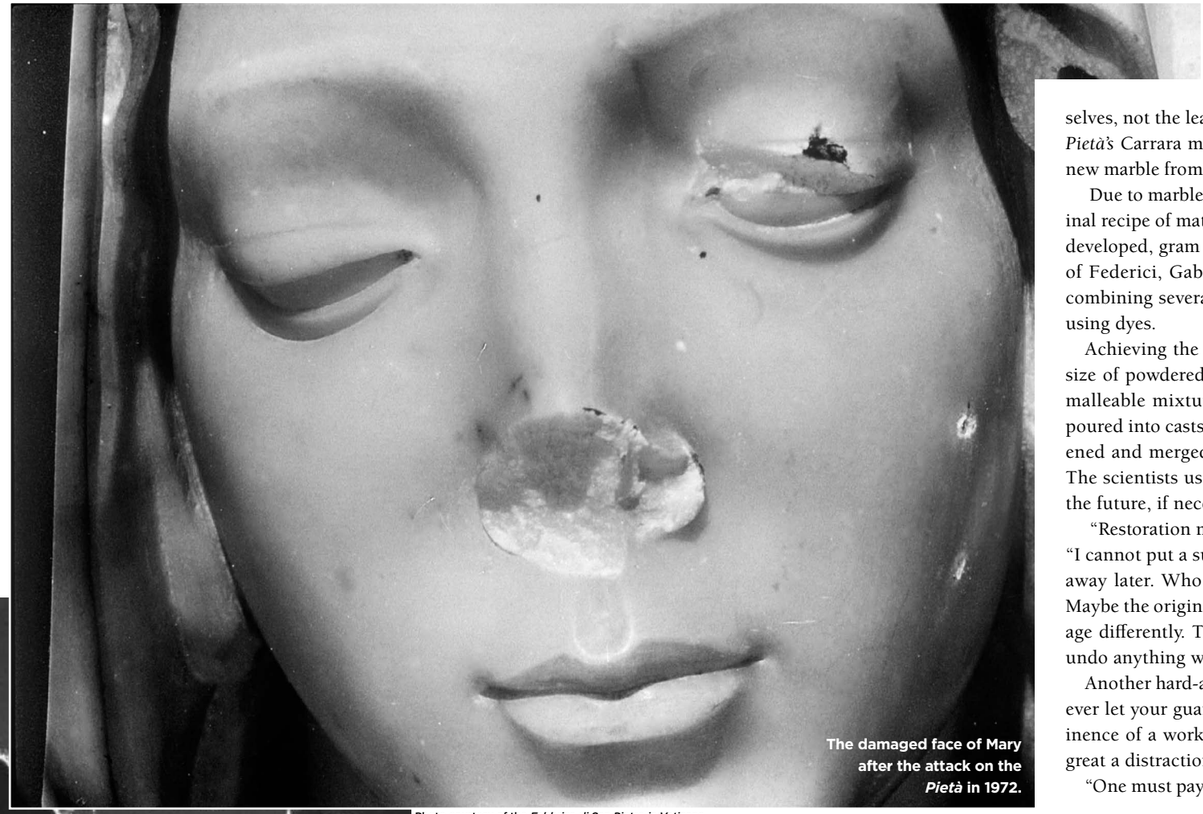
The director of the lab, Dr. Federici, remembered that there was an exact replica of the *Pietà* that had been made of plaster in 1944. It was in the historical museum of St. Peter's.

The work would be difficult; they had no latex, laser or 3D printers. But Federici knew that by using silicon rubber, the team would be able to use the replica to create molds for various parts of the statue that had been damaged, especially the delicate eye of Mary that had been smashed to powder.

"Today, the face of the Madonna is exactly the same as that sculpted by Michelangelo. The only thing that is different is the matter of the parts reconstituted because they are made of resin and marble granules," Gabrielli says.

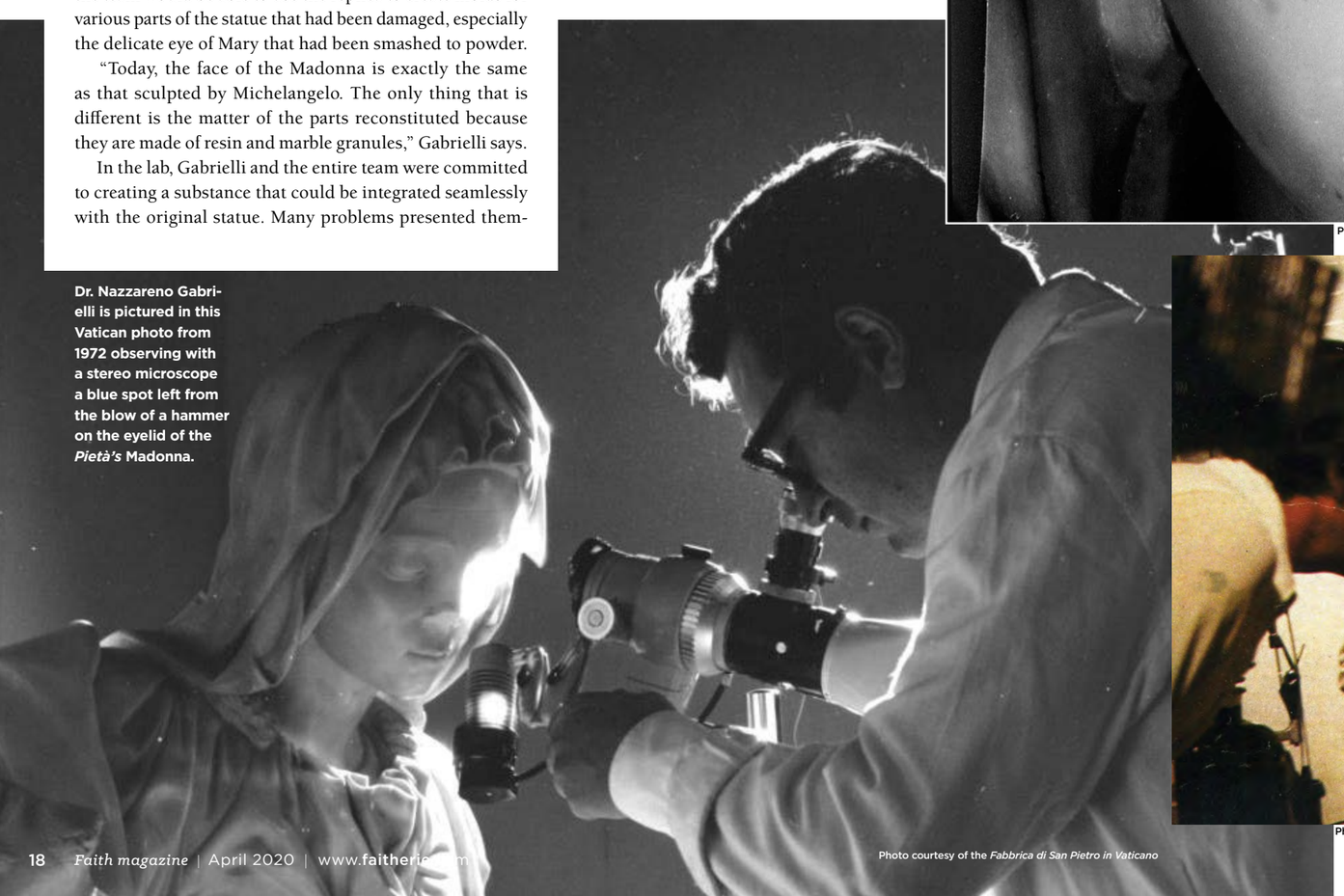
In the lab, Gabrielli and the entire team were committed to creating a substance that could be integrated seamlessly with the original statue. Many problems presented themselves, not the least of which was that the whiteness of the *Pietà*'s Carrara marble had aged over the centuries. Using new marble from the same quarry was out of the question.

> "Restoration must always be reversible. I cannot put a substance on a work of art that I can't take away later. Who knows what will happen in 100 years?"



The damaged face of Mary after the attack on the *Pietà* in 1972.

Photo courtesy of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano*



Dr. Nazzareno Gabrielli is pictured in this Vatican photo from 1972 observing with a stereo microscope a blue spot left from the blow of a hammer on the eyelid of the *Pietà's* Madonna.

Photo courtesy of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano*

The scientists charged with restoring the *Pietà* are pictured in 1972.

Photo courtesy of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano*

Due to marble's translucent and porous nature, an original recipe of material for the restoration would have to be developed, gram by gram. Eventually, under the direction of Federici, Gabrielli and his team hit upon the idea of combining several types and colors of marble rather than using dyes.

Achieving the precise blend necessary with the correct size of powdered marble was a painstaking process. This malleable mixture, combined with resin, could then be poured into casts made from the replica of the *Pietà*, hardened and merged seamlessly into the original sculpture. The scientists used an adhesive that could be removed in the future, if necessary.

"Restoration must always be reversible," Gabrielli says. "I cannot put a substance on a work of art that I can't take away later. Who knows what will happen in 100 years? Maybe the original marble and the material we created will age differently. Those who come after us must be able to undo anything we've done."

Another hard-and-fast rule by which they abided: Never, ever let your guard down. Stopping to consider the prominence of a work of art or the artist who created it is too great a distraction.

"One must pay maximum attention at all times, with utmost respect," Gabrielli says. "It is like a surgeon. There can be no emotional participation. Passion? Yes, of course! Skill and competence? Of course. But the minute you are not working at full attention, something will go wrong."

One of the most difficult challenges the team encountered ended up having one of the simplest solutions. Dried blue paint from the hammer used in the attack transferred to the marble statue. Any solvent used to remove the paint would surely cause it to disperse into the marble.

The highly educated team of scientists decided to try using a piece of tape — the simple kind found in any office or home. They placed it gently over the marks, rubbed it softly and discovered with great joy that the blue paint lifted off without a trace.

By September 1972, the scientists were confident they could hand off their recommendations to the art re-

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Dr. Nazzareno Gabrielli is pictured today outside the offices of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* in Vatican City. He is the last surviving member of the team that restored the damaged *Pietà*.

Photo by Anne-Marie Welsh

storers, who would apply them directly to the *Pietà*.

"Fortunately, it went well," Gabrielli says. "And at the end of it all, I wrote in my journal, 'Today, December 21, the restoration has ended by the grace of God.'"

Days later, Pope St. Paul VI came to the basilica to bless the restored masterpiece. Today, it sits behind a bullet-proof glass enclosure.

Gabrielli says he was lucky to work on the restoration of a piece of art created by one of history's most gifted artists. Artists around the world learned from their experience.

Gabrielli went on to oversee the restoration of the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel and to guide renovations of the necropolis underneath St. Peter's Basilica. He later developed state-of-the-art methods for embalming the bodies of many saints, including St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina and Pope St. John XXIII, whose bodies are on display for the faithful to venerate.

"A very educated restorer once said to me, 'Look, doctor, nothing happens by chance.' And it's true," Gabrielli says. "It is providence."

Nearly a half-century after the attack at St. Peter's Basilica, providence continues to provide the *Pietà*'s perfection to the world. ✝

> "Today, the face of the Madonna is exactly the same as that sculpted by Michelangelo."

To read a more detailed account of the restoration of Michelangelo's *Pietà,* go to **https://www.eriercd.org/images/sections/news/pdf/PietaRestoration.pdf.** The account was written by Dr. Nazzareno Gabrielli for the 40th anniversary of the restoration in 2012. It is made available by *Faith* magazine for the first time in English.

Pietà unites Christians in sorrow, hope

BY MARY SOLBERG

Piety, pity and perfection — three p's that capture Michelangelo's *Pietà.*

The term *pietà* has its roots in the Italian word for "pity" and the Latin word for "piety."

But for many who gaze upon the sculpture depicting the Blessed Mother holding the dead Christ, perfection comes to mind, too, both artistically and spiritually.

Created by the young Michelangelo in 1499, this iconic image on display at St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican remains today one of the most popular statues in Christian art. Churches around the world, including many in the Diocese of Erie, display their own interpretation of the scene.

"Beautiful art unites us," says Father Justin Pino, archivist for the Diocese of Erie and pastor of St. Leo Magnus Parish, Ridgway. "We need not travel to Rome to see the *Pietà,* for replicas of it are here in our diocese in many of our churches."

St. Leo is among the many parishes in the diocese's 13 counties that showcase large *pietà* statues. Some are kept inside the main worship space; others are outside, either in cemeteries or alcoves. Some are marble, some are stone. Some are painted; others are made of polished wood.

But whatever the material, the *Pietà* touches us at a deep level, says Stephen Paul Toney, a DuBois resident who donated a restored *pietà* statue to St. Catherine of Siena Parish in DuBois.

"Out of all statue forms, the *Pietà* is one of the most significant. It tells a story, and everyone can relate to it," Toney says. "Mary's deep sorrow with her son in her arms and his lifeless body shows humanness and how we anguish when we lose a loved one. It's hard to deal with that."

Toney, who is the music director at Queen of the World Parish, St. Marys, donated a *pietà* in memory of his father, Edward, a St. Catherine parishioner who died in 1993. The statue evokes the deep distress his family felt at Edward's sudden death due to a massive heart attack.

"When people are suffering through the loss of a loved one, they can relate to Mary's facial expression," Toney says.

Toney acquired the *pietà* he donated — unfinished — from the now-closed St. Benedict Monastery convent in St. Marys. He contacted a local restorer, Mary Berkos, who cleaned and painted it.

The vibrant colors and a teardrop in Mary's eye make it all the more real for Toney.

"Through the power of prayer and our belief in God, that's where there's a ray of hope," he says.

Pietàs around the diocese

Pietàs grace many churches throughout the Diocese of Erie. The images shown here (most of which were contributed) are of statues at the following parishes: Holy Rosary in Johnsonburg, St. Bernard in Bradford, St. Catherine of Siena in DuBois, St. George in Erie, St. Tobias in Brockway, St. Leo in Ridgway, St. Peter Cathedral in Erie, St. Stanislaus in Erie, and Holy Cross in Fairview.