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Mission San Miguel's Christmas Miracle

Parishioners will celebrate their first Christmas in the historic church since it was ravaged by an earthquake in 2003. It has been an arduous, often uncertain and costly journey.

By Steve Chawkins

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Reporting from San Miguel

The early prospects for Mission San Miguel looked bleak. After an earthquake days before Christmas in 2003, the tottering 1818 church was declared unsafe to enter. The Diocese of Monterey and the Franciscan order were preparing to close it permanently, saying they couldn't afford to pay for crucial repairs.

Outside the 16th of California's 21 missions was surrounded by a chain link fence. Inside, the moment of the San Simeon earthquake was frozen for more than a year, memorialized by shattered statues, sheared-off chunks of plaster and two withered, still-decorated Christmas trees.

This week, parishioners in the tiny town of San Miguel will celebrate their first Christmas in the church since the magnitude 6.5 quake, which damaged 480 buildings in the area and killed two people in nearby Paso Robles. With help from an insurance settlement, charitable foundations, individual donors and parish enchilada sales, the church and other buildings on the grounds have been stabilized.

Precious murals by Salinan Indians have survived construction work and are slated for restoration. Some 500 termite-damaged, water-stained pine ceiling planks have been meticulously taken down, preserved, and put back up, one by one. Even pig bristles trapped in paint two centuries old have been saved in place, their exact locations documented for future historians.

"It's like a rebirth," said Reimi Campomenosi, a parish member who was alone in the church watering the Christmas trees when the quake hit that Dec. 22nd. "The roof was lifted up and debris came raining down. Afterward, I turned off the gas and electricity, and went around blowing out the candles."

Last week, choir director Campomenosi played the church organ at a Sunday Mass - - The first time she'd sat down at the instrument, which had been damaged, in six years. Services in the church resumed only a couple of months ago. Until then, a dwindling band of parishioners would worship in the local senior center, in a cramped museum room or outdoors, on blankets and under umbrellas.

San Miguel is not the best-known mission but it's the only one with its original interior more or less intact. Under the direction of a Spanish-born artist, some of the Salinan Indians who lived on the mission grounds are believed to have painted the walls with a stunning variety of garlands, pillars, urns, floral patterns and pink-and-green sunbursts.

Over the years, some of the pigments have turned to dust. In a few spots, candle drippings mar the walls. In other places, friezes are blurred by generations of worshippers brushing against them. Next to one pew, a bored parishioner scratched the image of a schooner in full sail. It's still on the wall—though graffiti by Indians at other missions has long since been whitewashed over, art historians say.

“Our initial problem seemed to be that the paintings were so fragile that any attempt to repair the building would destroy the artwork,” said John Fowler, a San Luis Obispo CPA hire to coordinate the restoration effort. “It took a couple of years just to understand how we’d go about the process while trying to protect the treasures inside.”

Bolstering 5-foot-thick adobe walls required heavy equipment and many days of drilling. Meanwhile, seismic experts had concluded that vibrations from trains on tracks across the road could trigger the building’s collapse.

In 2006, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the mission on its annual listing of America’s 11 most endangered sites.

“There were some scary moments,” Fowler said, recalling a time when structural work made it necessary for Pat Taylor, an adobe expert from Mesilla, N.M., to slice off - - and later reattach - - 1-inch-thick, 4-foot-wide swaths of ornate decoration.

“We were wondering just how much we’d have to peel back,” Fowler said.

Experts converged on San Miguel, peering with high-tech instruments into layers of paint, wood, and adobe. Wood conservator John Griswold confronted the same dilemma as other team members: “We had to decide how far to take it,” he said. “On the one hand, the damage could be really disfiguring and distracting, but on the other there was something authentic about it.”

His solution was a special pigment to partly hide stains without giving a shiny new look to a ceiling that had seen nearly 200 years of hard times.

Reading the church’s scarred façade like a rare old book; structural engineer Nels Roselund could trace some deep cracks to the 1859 Ft. Tejon earthquake, and the tilt of one wall to a century of bad drainage. He devised a way of bracing the church’s front with a concrete frame but still is uncertain about the future of a sacristy wall that had pulled away from the building by about eight inches.

“It’s not like you can just go to a handbook for all this,” he said.

Perhaps the biggest unknown was financial. Foundations stepped forward with checks, and parishioners held teas and golf tournaments; but an attempt by state Sen. Abel Maldonado (R-Santa Maria) to secure state funding for the church repairs failed on constitutional grounds.

Lloyds of London settled the church’s claim for about \$6.25 million after negotiations attended by an aide to U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.)

“She just wanted to stress how important this mission is to the state of California,” Fowler said.

So far, about \$10 million has been raised, Fowler said, and the hope is to find \$3 million to \$5 million more for future work.

The mission’s history is similar to that of others. Some 3,000 Indians lie in unmarked graves in its cemetery, many of them prey to European diseases. Father Fermin Francisco de Lasuen, who founded San Miguel in 1797, believed, as did other missionaries, that his purpose was to save souls. The “neophytes” were housed and trained in various skills. But punishments for infractions like leaving without permission were harsh, for in Lasuen’s words, the Indians “shamelessly pursue without restraint whatever their brutal appetites suggest to them.”

Some of her ancestors may have been mistreated, acknowledges Shirley Macagni, a retired rancher and Salinan elder who has worked toward the mission’s restoration. “But,” she says, “the padres” overall motives were good: They were to take care of and teach the native people, and teach them they did. Some of my own ancestors turned out to be the best cowboys in the country.”

When Mexico abandoned the mission system in the 1830’s, San Miguel declined rapidly. Over the years, the sprawling property housed a dance hall, a sewing machine shop, a saloon, and herds of farm animals roaming through empty buildings. In 1848 bandits hacked to death William Reed, then a co-owner of the property, and his pregnant wife, their 4-year old son, a midwife and a number of his employees.

In 1928, the Franciscans started operating the mission again. Through the decades, they patched up the mission's failing structures; but in the end, their attempts were inadequate.

"We were sitting here watching it crumble," said Father Larry Gosselin, the friar in charge of the mission. "What could we do?"

Now there are plans to hold concerts and host community events in a new church hall and to finally preserve the Salinan murals before time erodes them further.

In brown robe and sandals, Gosselin speaks of "a whole new chapter" - - but points to a large window over the choir loft as testament that some things don't change.

"Sept. 29 at 7:24 a.m.," he intones

That's the feast day of St. Michael Archangel - - the mission's namesake - - and a time of day when the sun pours through to illuminate an antique wooden figure of the saint in a perfect rectangle of light.

"From the pulpit," Gosselin says, "it's almost blinding."

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