

## HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

### ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE GESU

(Written Spring, 1983)

#### I. NAME

Historic: Roman Catholic Church of the Gesu

Common: Same

#### II. LOCATION

Street Address: 1145 West Wisconsin Avenue

Legal Property Description: SW ¼ SEC 29, SE ¼ SEC 30-7-22, Blk. 251 lot 1 East 92 feet of N 22 feet of lot 3, W 48 feet of N 202 feet of lot 8 and partition of SW ¼ SEC 29 adjacent.

#### III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

#### IV. OWNER

Marquette Jesuit Associates, Inc.  
1404 West Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53233

#### V. DESCRIPTION

The Roman Catholic Church of the Gesu is a massive edifice built in 1893-94 on the western edge of the Marquette University campus. It is basilican in plan with transept and an apsidal end. The nave measures 50 feet wide, 138 feet long and 70 feet high. The roof is composed of steeply pitched, intersecting gables covered with gray slate. The walls are finished with rock-faced, light-gray limestone laid in coursed ashlar.

The Gothic Revival style of Gesu Church was influenced by the cathedrals of northern France. The main façade is dominated by two square towers of differing height ornamented with stone carved crockets and copper finials. The west tower rises 260 feet and contains a clock and belfry. The east tower is of similar design, but much shorter. Their polygonal spires are covered with dark gray slate and topped with gold crosses. At the intersection of the nave and transepts is a spire-topped lantern. Below the 28 foot in diameter rose window on the main façade, is a projecting entrance vestibule of carved stone added in 1902. It is faced with three gabled Gothic portals enframed with compound arches.

The fenestration in the towers, side aisles and clerestory consists of lancet arched windows of stained glass depicting various saints of the Roman Catholic Church. At the ends of the transepts are large arched stained glass windows depicting the Nativity and the Ascension of Christ. These windows were added at various periods in the history of the church, but all were

designed in Munich at the Royal Bavarian Institute for Stained Glass under the direction of F.X. Zettler.

## VI. SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built: 1893-94, addition 1902

Builder/Architect: Henry C. Koch & Company, architect  
Herman J. Esser, architect

Historic American Buildings Survey

Milwaukee Landmark, 1975

### Written Statement of Significance

The Church of the Gesu has been noted by local architectural historian, Richard W.E. Perrin as one of the most imposing church edifices in Milwaukee. It is significant as an example of nineteenth century ecclesiastical French Gothic architecture, for its association with noted Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch and for its historical associations with the establishment of the Jesuit order in Milwaukee and the founding of Marquette University.

Gesu is one of the city's major examples of ecclesiastical French Gothic architecture. It was designed by Henry C. Koch, one of Milwaukee's most accomplished architects of the nineteenth century. Among his major commissions were the City Hall, the Pfister hotel and Calvary Presbyterian Church, as well as all of the public schools built in Milwaukee between 1873 and 1881 and numerous imposing residences. Within a limited budget of slightly over \$150,000 he was able to complete the present church within 20 months after the cornerstone was laid on May 21, 1893. The resulting Gothic style structure is sparing in its display of ornamentation both inside and out. The interior is divided into an upper and lower church with a seating capacity of 1,450 each. Among the significant interior features are the outstanding stained glass windows; the marble "Pieta", the only known sculpture of the noted 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Giovanni Dupre in the United States; and the elaborate marble high altar designed by the Italian artist Vanvini and installed by Milwaukee architect, Alexander C. Eschweiler in 1927.

The Church of the Gesu is historically significant for its association with the establishment of the Jesuit Order of priests in Milwaukee. The Jesuit Order has a great interest in education and it was by their efforts that Marquette University was founded. Gesu Church itself had its origins in the merger of the pioneer Jesuit church of St. Gall, founded in 1849, and Holy Name Church established in 1875. Bishop Henni of Milwaukee was the impetus for bringing the Jesuits to Milwaukee. While on a trip to Europe in 1849, Henni received \$16,000 from a wealthy Belgian to establish a Jesuit school in his diocese. In selecting a site for the new facility, Henni first proposed to purchase a brick house and eight lots on North Van Buren Street. This was declined by the Jesuit fathers who were to staff the school because it was within the St. John's Cathedral parish. Instead they agreed to assume control of St. Gall's parish. The first Jesuit priests arrived from St. Louis in 1855 and established a school to educate Catholic youth at St. Gall.

The first years of St. Gall were extremely difficult because of poor administration. When Father Stanislaus Lalumiere was appointed to St. Gall in 1861, he was faced with a dwindling

parish. By his dynamic leadership he developed St. Gall into the largest Roman Catholic parish in Milwaukee. During the 1860's he was responsible for rebuilding the boys school, starting a girls school, building a new St. Gall church and securing the charter for Marquette University in 1864, even though the college was not to open for 18 more years. He established the second Jesuit parish, Holy Name Church, in 1875 and was appointed president of Marquette College in 1887. It was during the 1880's that he began a campaign to unite the two Jesuit parishes into a single parish. He organized the subscription drive for the construction of the new church and supervised the architects in its design. The cornerstone laying ceremony for Gesu Church in 1983 was one of the major events in the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic Church in Milwaukee.

## **VII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends the Roman Catholic Church of the Gesu be designated as a Historic Structure for both its architectural and historical significance.

## VIII. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall be applicable only to the Roman Catholic Church of the Gesu. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

### A. Known Alterations or Additions

The review of historic photographs, building permits and on-site inspection has revealed that the exterior of Gesu Church has remained largely unchanged since 1895. Known alterations include:

1. In 1901-02 the carved stone and terra cotta entry porch was added replacing the original wood frame one.
2. A pedestrian bridge was added about 1910 that connects the church on the east façade with the second floor of Johnston Hall.
3. In 1931, the terra cotta ornament and copper cladding on the west tower was repaired and replaced.
4. In 1956, a pedestrian bridge was built that connects the church on the south façade with the second level of the Gesu Parish Hall.
5. Other changes include the heavy metal screens placed over the openings on all facades and the bricking-up of the ground floor openings to the rear.

### B. Roofs

The roofline, height and pitch are significant to the architectural design of the church as are the spires that top the front towers and rear lantern. These surfaces are covered with slate and trimmed with copper. Subject to the approval of the Commission, these surfaces should not be changed or modified. Skylights, dormers or solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces facing south if they do not visually intrude upon the east, west or north elevations. The slate and copper should be retained to the fullest extent possible. Replacement materials shall match the original in design, color and texture.

### C. Openings

The architectural integrity of this structure has been maintained by the retention of the original door and window openings and their location, style and materials. The terra cotta tracery, lead calmes, stained glass and paneled wood doors are significant as part of the historic architectural fabric. Subject to Commission approval, changes in size, configuration and materials of existing openings shall not be permitted except for restoration to the documented original condition. Approval for changes shall be based on the compatibility of the proposed changes with the style and period of the building.

D. Additions

The north, east and west elevations are integral to the structure's architectural significance. No additions may be made to these elevations. This includes additional skywalks or overhead passages used to connect Gesu Church to adjacent buildings. The south elevation has been slightly obscured by the 1956 pedestrian bridge. However, the design of the apsidal end and lower flanking wings is still intact and is a major architectural element to the structure. Additions to the south elevation require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon all elevations.

E. Porches, Trim and Ornamentation

There shall be no changes to the existing porches, trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. The historic architectural fabric includes all terra cotta elements found as pinnacles, crockets, balustrades, coping and tracery on the front and side entries, the towers, and the transept and nave gables; all decorative copper elements such as pinnacles, crockets and ribbing on the towers; the carved stone work of the front entry, the polished granite columns found on the front entry and gallery; and the wood carved lantern and tracery above the front entries. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

F. Materials

Unpainted brick and stone shall not be painted or covered. Any repairs, including repointing of defective mortar shall match the original in color, style, texture and strength characteristics. Masonry shall be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible approved by the Commission.