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## Historic stained-glass windows coming to local church

Building in Harlem to be demolished

By John Davis  
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**LAGRANGEVILLE** — Stained-glass windows that will grace the new Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Catholic church will be removed from a 100-year old church in Harlem despite community opposition.

"It seems like a backdoor effort to render the building useless," said Jim Capel, chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel, D-New York City.

Groundbreaking took place Nov. 5 on the new Blessed Kateri church on Route 82, which will be built in pastureland behind the current church, said Monsignor William Belford, Blessed Kateri's priest.

The larger church is being built to meet a growing Catholic population in the LaGrange area.

New York archdiocese Archbishop Edward Egan announced this year the closing of a number of churches in New York City because of declining parishioners. St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem was closed by the archdiocese three years ago because of similar dwindling Sunday Mass attendance.

The archdiocese's closing of the church and plans to demolish it ignited protests from a number of longtime parishioners, as well as



**Courtesy photo**  
*These windows at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Harlem are set to go to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Church in LaGrangeville.*

organizations interested in preserving the historic building.

"My entire family has been parishioners at the church since the 1940s," said Julienne Jack, president of the Harlem Preservation Foundation.

Archdiocese spokesman Joseph Zwilling did not return three phone calls on the issue.

Belford announced in the Sept. 20 Blessed Kateri church bulletin: "During the summer we made another pilgrimage to the closed parish church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem, to consult with the firm that will remove, repair and remount beautiful 100-year old stained-glass windows that will be a key feature of our new church."

Belford would not comment on the archdiocese's plans to raze the Harlem church and build low-income senior housing on the site. But he said, "The diocese is looking to maintain and preserve the great things of the church."

## Main altar destroyed

Eric Tait, a former St. Thomas altar boy, said the main altar of the church has been destroyed and two side altars removed — one sent across town to St. Patrick's Cathedral.

"They are raping the Harlem architectural legacy to enrich other communities," said Tait, vice president of the Harlem Preservation Foundation.

Belford said he was not certain how many of the stained-glass windows would be transferred to the new church.

"The windows should be given a new home," he said.

St. Thomas parishioners have gained the support of Rangel, their congressional representative.

"We are trying get it turned over to a community preservation agency," Capel said of the church. "We certainly support the glass windows remaining there."

St. Thomas parishioners are frustrated by lack of response from the archdiocese to their pleas. This includes an offer by a Harlem developer to pay the archdiocese \$7.2 million for the parish property to preserve the church and build housing next door.

"It's too bad there's not more dialogue and transparency," said Ann-Isabel Friedman, director of sacred sites for the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

The Preservation League of New York in 2005 designated the church on 118th Street one of its "Seven to Save." The organization cited the church's late-Victorian Gothic style, elaborate marble and wood carving and rich stained-glass windows.

"They were designed for the church and they were meant for this church," league President Jay DiLorenzo said of the windows.

The windows were designed and installed during the 1889-1907 construction by Franz Mayer Glassworks of Munich.

"I consider it a shame St. Thomas is being destroyed," said Gabriel Mayer, president of the Munich firm. "Here's something that's happening that in a cultural sense is a crime."

If the archdiocese does proceed to demolish St. Thomas, nobody wants to see the windows depicting the life of Christ destroyed.

"That's a wonderful, wonderful thing for Blessed Kateri, but that's the last resort," DiLorenzo said.

"That's our hope, to preserve them," Belford said.

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