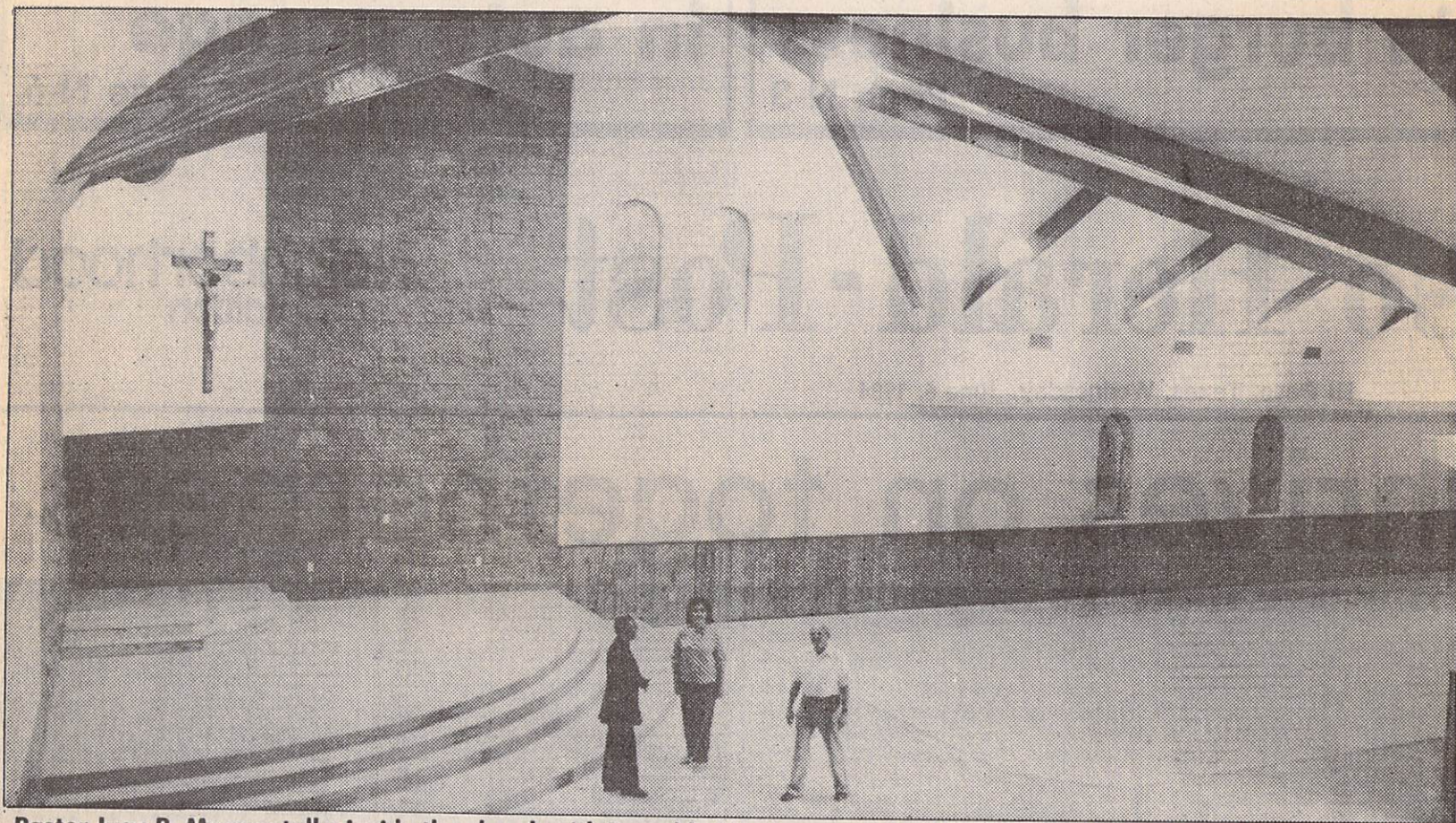


Neighborhoods



Pastor Juan R. Moreno talks inside the church with Rumalda Martinez, president of the church council, and Agustin Gonzales, who is vice president.

Community effort

Townspeople pitch in to rebuild San Miguel church

By Terrence Poppa
El Paso Herald-Post

Agustin Gonzales remembers he was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when his mother called to tell him that morning what most of the New Mexico town of San Miguel already knew.

The Church of San Miguel was on fire. It was Jan. 30, 1983.

Gonzales quickly dressed and ran through the town to see if he could help the townspeople and the firefighters save the church.

But he stopped dead in his tracks.

Thick smoke was billowing high into the sky, and the firefighters seemed helpless.

"When I saw the fire," he said, "I knew the church was gone."

The fire started in the sacristy around 7 a.m., the result of a short circuit in old wiring. By noon, all that remained of the 57-year-old church were two side walls and the tower, the only parts of the church that had been made of volcanic rock from the ancient lava flow west of the small town.

It was a sad time, said Gonzales, who remembered seeing many of the townspeople crying as they watched their church burn.

But in the street in front of the smoldering church were several wooden pews spotted with burn marks, the tabernacle, scorched statues of the Virgin Mary and St. Michael, chalices and church records.

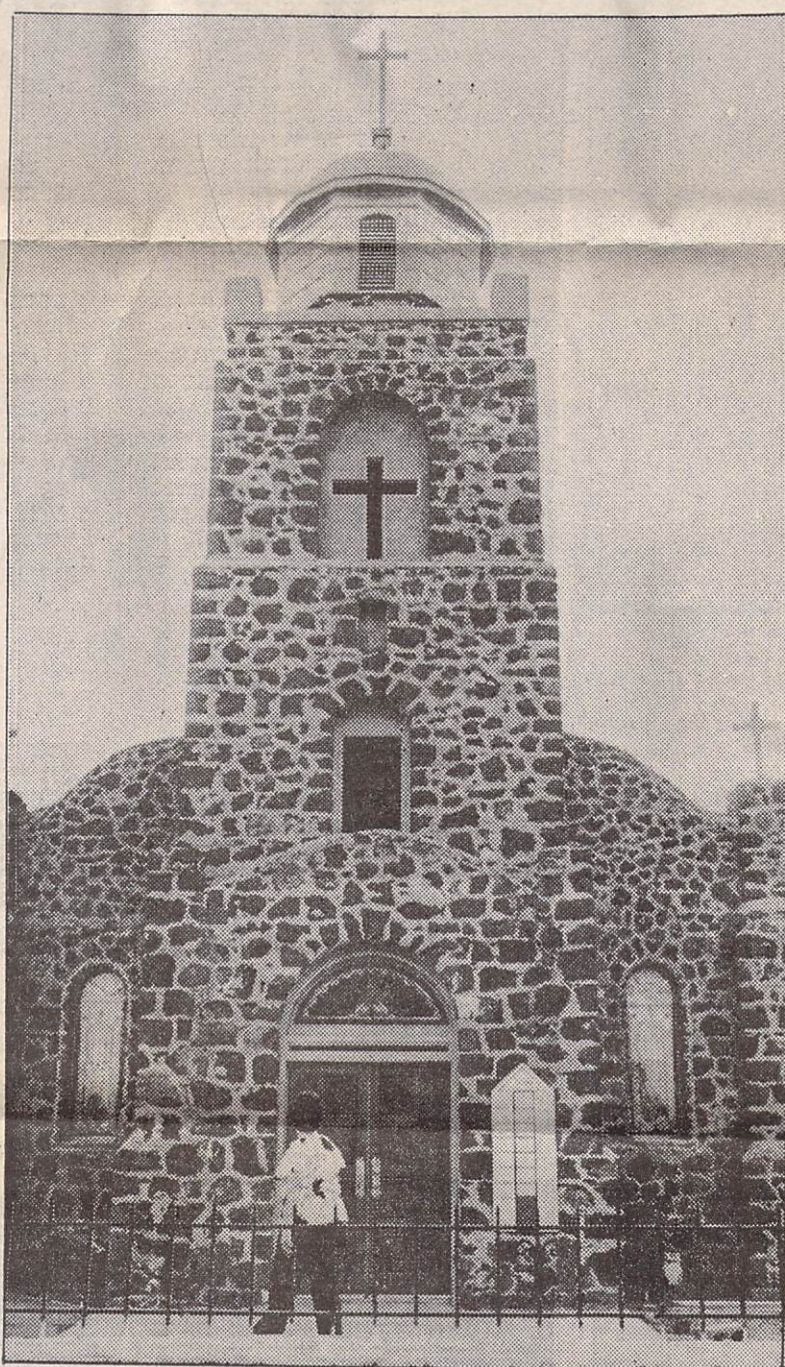
They had been saved by daring parishioners who had dashed into the smoke-filled church to rescue what they could while the firefighters were distracted.

The pitiful heap was a symbol of the townspeople's determination to build the Church of San Miguel anew.

On May 27, 1984, Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of the Diocese of Las Cruces raised the eucharist, the symbol of new life, as the congregation knelt before him with bowed heads.

They had to kneel on the hard floor and sit on folding chairs or stand because the church was so crowded, but the parishioners of San Miguel were very pleased.

They were pleased the bishop, who was dressed in white



Parishioners are proud of the San Miguel Church, which was recently rebuilt after a fire.

Herald-Post photos by John Hopper

and gold garments, had come to dedicate the newly reconstructed Church of San Miguel.

Rumalda Martinez, president of the parish council, said she could hardly wait for the big day to arrive.

Like many people in the community, she went to the church two or three times every day to see how the workmen were progressing with the final touches.

"It's a wonderful feeling going there and seeing the new church," she said.

The ceremony was regal. Accompanied by 11 other

priests, including San Miguel Pastor Juan Moreno, Bishop Ramirez blessed the church with holy water and oil, going from corner to corner and wall to wall of the new temple.

In his homily, the bishop praised the community — both parishioners and non-parishioners alike — for pitching in to help.

"As Christians, we should always come together to help one another," he said.

The rededication ceremony this May 27 was only the first half of the celebration.

After the service, the chatty

congregation walked down the street for a fiesta in the parish hall, which had served for nearly 1 1/2 years as the temporary church.

The fire will be remembered in San Miguel for many years. But what will be remembered even more fervently is the community effort to rebuild the church.

"Ever since the day of the fire, there's been an effort by people to do whatever they can to reconstruct the church," said Miss Martinez, who organized fund-raisers throughout 1983.

Only days after the fire, more than 100 people gathered in the parish hall to decide what to do.

"The majority wanted to reconstruct and expand the old church, but some others wanted a new church built on a new site," she said.

A show of hands decided the question.

The vote touched off a drive for funds that may not end for several years.

While an insurance policy paid \$102,000, the remainder of the \$220,000 it took to reconstruct the church was either donated by townspeople or was borrowed from the Diocese of Las Cruces.

The parish has 10 years to repay the \$70,000 it borrowed from the diocese.

The balance was raised from donations.

"It took a lot of sacrifice," said Miss Martinez. "Many of the families here are very large, but they give whatever they can."

Many of the residents of San Miguel, some of them not members of the church, have pledged \$2 a week to help repay the loan from the diocese.

A general contractor was hired to do the construction work, which began in January, but some of the parishioners pitched in to help with the hard labor.

Dr. Robert Windauer of Las Cruces, an amateur carpenter, built the altar that is now in the church, Miss Martinez said.

"The rebuilding of the church was a community effort," she said. "Not only parishioners, but people who don't belong to the church helped out."