

People Keep the Spirit of Benito's Alive

By Mark Morelli, Akron *Beacon Journal*

Benito's, the century-old (and then some) Cuyahoga Falls blues and jazz club, won't see the light of June. By then, it will have been flattened to make room for an office building.

That's sad. Stepping into that ruddy two-story joint in the shadow of state Route 8 made you part of a magical throwback to neighborhood saloons where the piano, not the jukebox, reigned.

Debbie Roth, whose late husband Bill led the regular Wednesday night Mostly Blues Band, contributed something very comforting to the liner notes of a jazz CD recently recorded there. "Benito's isn't a place, it's the people." A spirit of conviviality will not be crushed. Only a mere building.

We met friends there religiously. A few weeks ago, they canceled. They were sullen that day, preoccupied with how to tell their two small kids that their parish priest was in a sex scandal. How weird is this world? Women repeatedly told me they felt especially safe at Benito's. You simply couldn't use "meat market" and "Ira Gershwin" in the same sentence.

Benito's was like church to many of us. Both celebrate life through traditional song, friendship and community. (Plus, I didn't go to Benito's every week either!)

Benito's will find a new home, and the good people will follow. Likewise, it will take a lot to make Catholics reject their faith. Priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley explained why Catholics stick to it: "They like their heritage, their communalism, their sacraments, their sense of God's presence in the world, their stories, their images, their rain forest of metaphors. They should give that up because their clergy fail to be what they should be and because some of their leaders are idiots?"

In the vein of "all politics is local," the church's success has always been in the hands, hearts and homilies of the foot-soldier priests who will, week by week, slowly reclaim the trust. In the din of cries from wounded children, outraged parishioners and backpedaling bishops, there's another voice, the same one heard by Francis of Assisi: "Rebuild my church, for as you can see, it is falling into ruin!"

We will reconvene. For on jazzy Saturday nights as well as solemn Sunday mornings, it isn't the building; it's the people.