

## **Bait and Switch Drama at the Covington Basilica**

By Michael S. Rose

The renovation of Assumption Cathedral in Covington, Kentucky

### **Part One**

Covington Catholics brace for basilica renovation

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Stained glass windows will be restored, mosaics repaired, walls cleaned, kneelers reinstalled, pews repaired—these are the items outlined in a fundraising newsletter and video released to parishes in the Diocese of Covington regarding the "preservation, restoration and refurbishment" of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, the mother church of northern Kentucky. Yet after the first in a series of four public meetings held at the basilica in September, rumors began to circulate that there was more to the \$4.7 million project than advertised. Some even suggested in letters to the editor of the local newspapers that the sanctuary of the century-old Gothic-style edifice might be dismantled.

Consequently, well over a hundred concerned members of the diocese, with varying degrees of incredulity, turned out at the second public meeting to hear architect Bill Brown present schemes 'A' through 'G.' The rumors not only proved to be true, but were rather mild compared to the eight plans that were presented that evening. Although both Bishop Robert W. Muench and the Colorado Springs-based Brown emphasized that "no decisions have been made," the drawings presented for discussion that night suggest they are preparing to radically restructure the interior of the cathedral church, from the placement of the pews and the baptismal font to the elimination of the ornate, hand-crafted oak woodwork, including the baldachino that surmounts the marble altar.

According to Brown, Bishop Muench organized the monthly meetings in order to hear the people of his diocese. "He wants a broad consultative process," Brown claimed. "He wants to hear as many voices as possible so that he can draw upon the accumulated wisdom of the People of God."

Brown challenged his audience to approach the project proposals with an open mind. "Let's have the courage to talk about the possibilities and work together as a Catholic community should," he pleaded. "Let's discard the silly things, get rid of the dumb things, and find out what the right thing is so that we can make one group consensus recommendation to the bishop as to what to do."

Given the opportunity to voice their concerns, person after person respectfully expressed his displeasure with the numerous proposals for restructuring their cathedral church. Those present at the second public meeting clearly articulated what they thought were "silly" or "dumb" ideas, forming a powerful consensus in less than 90 minutes, a remarkable display of unity (see sidebar below).

### **Objections voiced**

Many addressed the proposal for a full-immersion baptismal pool to be constructed either at the entrance to the nave or more centrally-located in the main aisle of the church. Teresa Wermeling of Park Hills said she thought, given those two options, the font was ill-placed, serving as an impediment for liturgical processions as in funeral and wedding Masses. Seven others who raised concerns concurred; some felt that the cathedral could not afford to lose any of its pews to accommodate the type of large pool envisioned by the architect; others were worried what would become of the present baptistery. Father John W. Cahill, pastor of the cathedral parish and a member of the 31-member Cathedral Steering Committee chaired by Bishop Muench defended Brown's proposals against the wave of objections presented by the laity. It boils down to "a question of immersion," he said, "and having people enter into the dying and rising of Christ by entering into the font."

Another remodeling issue hotly contested was the removal of the life-size wooden crucifix which now hangs above the high altar. None of Brown's eight schemes showed the crucifix present in the sanctuary or any other place in the church. "This woodwork probably can't be reproduced by anyone today," remarked Maria Merklin of Independence. "What I see being proposed here, just from an architectural standpoint, is that you're taking the 'Catholic' out of the church. I have nothing against Protestants," she added, "but I'm not Protestant."

Most disturbing for those present, however, was the plan to eliminate the present sanctuary. Each of Brown's proposals indicated the high altar moving forward to varying degrees. Most schemes proposed the altar to be placed at the crossing of the church, necessitating the removal of several rows of pews. The proposals also invariably included rearranging the seating around three or four sides of the altar, removing the hand-carved woodwork in the sanctuary, moving the bishop's chair (the cathedra), lectern and pulpit, and eliminating the marble communion rail. The fate of the baldachino, now the dominating artistic monument of the church, is uncertain to some degree. Some proposals call for its removal from the church while others propose a "reworked" version, eliminating the side walls and thinning out the remaining columns. The carved baldachino, perhaps the greatest of the cathedral's priceless treasures, features 16 saints and supports the crucifix.

Further, each of Brown's eight schemes reduced the sanctuary from its existing elevation of nine steps to three. Although many of the design proposals were justified by a desire for better visibility, lowering the sanctuary by five or six feet will eliminate the present visibility from nave to sanctuary. "It makes no sense whatsoever," commented one diocesan priest.

Out of the nearly twenty people who voiced concerns that evening, the few who spoke in favor of the proposal, were all members of the renovation steering committee, the group consecrated to make the "consensus" recommendations to Bishop Muench. In addition to Fr. Cahill, who defended the idea of "celebrating" the baptismal font by building an immersion pool at the main entrance of the church for symbolic reasons, Margo Johnson the guitar-Mass music director at the Basilica, walked to the front of the church to address the crowd, in what seemed to many to be a prepared speech. Johnson quickly revealed her bias, making many wonder about her suitability in sitting on the steering committee. "It doesn't matter what the church looks like," she said. "When the disciples gathered at the Last Supper, they weren't concerned about kneelers; they weren't even concerned about shoes."

Johnson remarked that she's aware of "a lot of support for [the renovation plans]." Accordingly, she urged all those present who support the project to "stand up and voice your opinion so we can hear something positive come from these proposals presented here." No one did so.

#### **Adaptive re-use**

The evening of questions and comments was punctuated by the final speech, delivered by Father Michael D. Barth, the bishop's Master of Ceremonies and another member of the project steering committee. "I was ordained in this magnificent edifice," he began. "Every time I have entered this cathedral I have been scared to death because it is such a magnificent and beautiful thing." But as the bishop's M.C., he continued, "I flip some questions around in my mind."

What do the stained glass windows in the apse look like? he wondered. Perhaps, if the woodwork in the sanctuary were removed, he continued, we would be able to see the windows. He also wonders whether the cathedra, the bishop's chair (which is designed into the sanctuary woodwork), is in the best possible position. "Many people can't see the bishop when he is presiding," he said.

The M.C.'s third question flipping around in his mind: "Is uni-directional seating the best way to worship 'actively'?" Invoking the hackneyed cliché that multi-directional seating encourages "full, conscious, active participation" called for by Vatican II, Fr. Barth suggested that, no, the traditional seating arrangement cannot foster this and the basilica needs to be rearranged so that it is possible. "If we gathered around the altar," he wondered, "wouldn't that be better?"

The fourth question raised by Fr. Barth is can our present baptistery adequately serve the diocese for the community celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism? Again, he suggests, no, it cannot. In fact, he said, having an immersion pool in the main aisle of the church would be not only communitarian, but highly symbolic each time we enter into the church. He suggested that the present baptistery would be best used as a repository for the chrism oils. The fifth point addressed by Fr. Barth was the location of the altar, which he believes must be brought out into the congregation so that all may "gather around" in community.

Many present that evening remarked afterward to this reporter that Fr. Barth's sermon seemed like a psychological ploy to have "the last word." Yet, whether the speech was "engineered" or not, the bishop's M.C. appeared to be very knowledgeable about the individual aspects of the remodeling project proposed in various forms by Bill Brown. Consequently, many wonder whether Fr. Barth "spilled the beans" with his zealous apologia for the architect's proposals, going so far as to offer justifications for each design consideration.

Every point raised by Fr. Barth was confirmed by a presentation board prepared (but not publicly presented) by Brown's firm. Entitled "Adaptive Re-Use," it gave a comprehensive listing of all the design possibilities envisioned by Fr. Barth, down to the smallest details such as using the present baptistry to hold the chrism oils. Cost estimates for each design feature were listed. Moreover, the use of the term "Adaptive Re-Use" to label the project is revealing. It confirms that the architects do not understand their undertaking as a "preservation, restoration, and refurbishment" project as advertised, but a full-blown restructuring of the basilica. The term "Adaptive Re-use" is used in the architectural world to denote taking an existing structure that was once used for a particular purpose (e.g., a train station), and adapting the architecture to be used for another purpose (e.g., a shopping mall). If the old purpose of the basilica was Catholic worship, as one might presume, how is the new purpose to be understood?

### **Consternation and deception**

Although laymen who voiced their objections at the October meeting were opposed to nearly all of the structural changes proposed for the church, none of the proposals bothered anyone as much as the perceived element of deception involved in fundraising for this project. "The consternation comes in, and I personally feel deception," said Stan Barczak of Richwood, "when you start introducing things that were not in the [fundraising] video, things that people didn't know that they were donating to." Dr. Arthur K. Kunath of Fort Thomas voiced a similar objection. "What bothers me is that this project was billed on Assumption Sunday as a refurbishment of the cathedral," he said. "Why do we need an architect if we're just going to clean the walls and the artwork and make other common sense improvements to the things such as the lighting and the sound system?"

According to the fundraising newsletter, "Faith in Action 2000," released by Bishop Muench to all parishes on August 5, "The Diocese of Covington seeks to raise \$4.7 million for the preservation, restoration and refurbishment of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption." The newsletter gives an analysis of the Cathedral's needs (see sidebar below). Yet, no mention is ever made of renovation, restructuring, remodeling or removing. Nothing suggests that any of the \$4.7 million will be used to make modifications in the sanctuary or any other part of the church. One man who identified himself as having helped with the fundraising for this project has "talked to a lot of people." He feels that when these people realize that the sanctuary will be restructured, "they won't fulfill their pledges." Already many people are asking for their donated money to be returned to them.

Notwithstanding innumerable objections to the contrary, both Bishop Muench and Bill Brown defended the project's process as it has progressed to date. Brown admitted that the \$4.7 million figure made allowance for "liturgical rearrangement" of the sanctuary, but insisted that the process "is thoroughly open and thoroughly honest." Bishop Muench contended that all the changes discussed that evening were included in the fundraising video made in June. "It talked about all the things that have been talked about tonight, including moving the altar forward," he assured.

He and others reminded everyone how fortunate they are to be given an opportunity to speak their minds. "These sessions aren't mandated. These meetings are freely offered," Brown explained. "I'm trying to listen," Bishop Muench assured, "and I am listening. No deception is intended."

Yet despite these reassurances many felt as though the bishop and architect had set up a meaningless meeting to give the impression that the general public was a part of the process, that they were "consulted."

### **Who is the architect?**

Another reason to suspect that major changes are in the works at the basilica is the architect hired to carry out the project. Bill Brown, is very well known in the national church renovation circuit. His involvement in the project is not good news for those who would like to see the basilica remain "as is" with the exception of common sense improvements. Brown's writings often focus on such practical items as the building/renovation process, hiring an architect, and fundraising. His articles have appeared in *Environment and Art Letter* (e.g. "Sources of Funds," April, 1988), *Liturgy* (e.g., "The Process of Building," Spring, 1986, in which he states that the process begins with a plea to build trusting relationships within the community), and *Assembly* (e.g., "Client-Centered Architecture," November, 1987). He is also editor of the *Building and Renovation Kit for Places of Catholic Worship* published by Liturgical Training Publications, one of the leading organizations promoting the destruction of Catholic churches over the past 35 years.

One recent project completed by Brown's firm is the Cathedral church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Sources in the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocese say that because of the outcry from the faithful even before the project commenced, "it is not as bad as it could have been." Nevertheless, the Fort Wayne renovation is similar to the eight proposals drafted by Brown for the basilica project. Cleaning and restoration was billed as a

primary goal, yet the final designs included radical structural remodeling, including removal of the altar rail, the construction of a full-immersion baptismal pool at the entrance to the church, a handicap ramp leading to the sanctuary, a modern ambo which moves up and down to accommodate readers, priests or bishops who are wheel-chair bound; the face and the mensa of the old high altar was removed to make a freestanding altar; the decorative hand-carved reredos was "lowered" to enable the congregation to see the feet of the Blessed Virgin in the stained glass window behind; the pews on the outside aisles were angled seven degrees toward the center; the pew ends were cut down by six inches for better "sight lines"; an elevator to the choir was added; theater lighting was installed; and the three front entrances to the church were reduced to one entrance, for "symbolic reasons." By the time the Fort Wayne Cathedral was rededicated in 1998, the budget on the project tripled, growing from \$1.2 million to \$3.6 million.

### **Sinking ship**

"We're rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," remarked Dr. Kunath after the October meeting. "The diocese has only two seminarians studying for the priesthood, and they want to spend almost five million dollars to rearrange the furniture in the cathedral?" he asked rhetorically. "It doesn't add up."

Several priests who spoke with this writer say that, while they would like to see the basilica and its present sanctuary preserved, there are much greater problems threatening the vitality of the Covington diocese. "It's hard to pay much attention to this renovation when we need to brace for the next scandal that will undoubtedly rock the Church in northern Kentucky," commented one diocesan priest who asked to go unnamed. Over the past decade the Diocese of Covington has weathered some of the stormiest scandals in the country, all related to sexual immorality and perversion in one way or another. Many of the older priests of the diocese believe the problems can be directly traced to the leadership of Bishop William A. Hughes, who was the bishop of Covington from 1979 until he resigned in 1994 at the age of 73, two years before diocesan bishops are required to tender a resignation to the Holy Father.

Those Catholics who were praying that his successor might steer the diocese out of the degenerate rut created by Bishop Hughes are sorely disappointed. "Little has changed," say Covington Catholics, and the present basilica deception is just another episode in a diocese hellbent on modernizing the faith of an area once considered one of the most morally and religiously conservative pockets in Catholic America. This is a critical time for the Diocese of Covington. The basilica "preservation, restoration and refurbishment" is a critical project. Bishop Muench's credibility is on the line. Will he honor the intentions stated in his fundraising literature? Will he honor his commitment to listen to the "People of God" in the Covington diocese? Or, will the adaptive re-use plan simply proceed as Fr. Barth outlined, over the overwhelming objections voiced at the October meeting?

### **A CASE OF FALSE ADVERTISING?**

On August 5, 1999, the Diocese of Covington sent out a fundraising newsletter for their \$10 million campaign, "Faith in Action 2000." \$4.7 million of this diocesan-wide capital campaign is allocated for the preservation, restoration, and refurbishment of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption. The newsletter explains the project thus:

"Over the last half-century, our beloved mother church has begun to show unmistakable signs of aging. An analysis of immediate needs identified several problem areas. The exterior has been overtaken by dirt, mildew and pollution. The protective shields on the stained glass are discolored and moisture-ridden, acting as a barrier to the outside light illuminating the interior of the Cathedral. The stained glass itself requires cleaning and repair. The beloved Duveneck murals need restoration. The irreplaceable mosaic Stations of the Cross call for refurbishing and repair. The interior walls and ceiling need to be cleaned and sealed to prevent cracking and leaking. The pews require extensive reworking. The worn-out and hazardous wooden platforms below the pews must be replaced. The Cathedral is hampered by antiquated steam heating, inadequate ventilation and a lack of air conditioning. The electrical system needs to be updated. The sound system is inadequate and unreliable. The plumbing is due for maintenance. "Cathedral parishioners and many other members of the diocesan family and local community recognize the important role our Cathedral plays in the spiritual and secular world, but their voluntary support defrays only a fraction of the overall cost of maintaining the physical complex. Their generous contributions are not sufficient to sustain and perpetuate the legacy entrusted to us by those who began work on it over 100 years ago. We owe it to those founding families, to future generations, and to ourselves as stewards of the Covington Diocese, to help fulfill the vision upon which our Cathedral was built—to stand as an enduring symbol of a strong Christian presence. The Diocese of Covington seeks to raise \$4.7 million for the preservation, restoration and refurbishment of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption."

Newspaper accounts have been similarly misleading. Consider the following:

"Here is how the diocese would like to use the campaign money: At least \$4.7 million toward the cleaning and restoration of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, 1140 Madison Ave. That amount includes \$500,000 that would go to a maintenance fund. Bill Brown, liturgical design consultant based in Colorado Springs, Colo., is leading the project. He said there are no final decisions on what exactly will be tackled, but he and Bishop Muench concurred that much is needed, and that now is the time to plan cleaning, preservation and restoration. They will spend the next month deciding which projects are priorities. Those include installing air conditioning, cleaning the stained glass, cleaning the murals, and restoring mosaics, wooden floors and pews and the original main altar table."

—*Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 6, 1999

"'The interior of the cathedral is dirty, and it's not that anyone has been a slouch,' said Bill Brown, the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based architect who will head the preservation project. 'Let's say you build (a church) in 1895 and you never touch it again. What will happen is it will just slowly, slowly insidiously decline.' A 30-member steering committee will meet Tuesday to establish a list of projects that will be tackled if fund-raising efforts are successful. Cleaning the cathedral's interior and exterior, making it more handicapped-accessible, providing more carvings and statues for the front exterior, and adding ambient lighting in the interior are expected to be high priorities."

—*Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 23, 1999

"Architect/liturgical design consultant Bill Brown shares with about 60 members of the diocese the preliminary concepts for the preservation, restoration and refurbishment of the Cathedral Basilica."

—*Messenger*, September 17, 1999

"Diocese officials announced last month a \$10-million fundraising campaign. Of that amount \$4.7 million would go to cleaning, restoring and renovating the cathedral. They have discussed using the money to clean the cathedral's interior and exterior, making it more handicap-accessible, providing more carvings and statues for the front exterior and adding ambient lighting in the interior."

—*Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 18, 1999

"At the first open meeting with the public on Sept. 14, about 60 members of the diocese gathered at the Cathedral Basilica, invited by Bishop Muench and the cathedral steering committee, to share preliminary plans for the preservation, restoration, and refurbishment of the cathedral. The capital campaign "Faith In Action 2000" will provide funding for the cathedral's restoration and refurbishment, and set up endowments for future cathedral maintenance and diocesan education."

—*Messenger*, September 24, 1999

## **Part Two**

Covington Catholics say they've been "duped"

Publication date: January 2, 2000

Covington's Bishop Robert W. Muench was on the firing line at a December 14 public meeting held to solicit opinions about renovation proposals for the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption. Approximately 200 people turned out to view the architect's latest renderings depicting how he proposes to renovate the mother church of northern Kentucky.

Bishop Muench explained to those present that Bill Brown, the Colorado Springs-based architect hired to oversee the renovation work, prepared just three schemes, reduced from the eight that were presented at the October meeting with the public (SCR, Nov/Dec, 1999).

The first of these three schemes showed the Basilica interior in its present form, untouched by structural alterations. The crowd was overwhelmingly opposed to the other two proposals, each featuring a radically-revised sanctuary. Although the schemes presented at December's meeting were somewhat less drastic than those showcased at previous meetings, the canopy-like baldachino, marble altar railing, and Appalachian oak woodwork remain fatalities in the current proposals. These two schemes, unlike the previous eight, did show the life-size crucifix present in various obscure locations in the sanctuary. Previous schemes did not include the crucifix anywhere in the designs. The new drawings also showed that the revised sanctuary would be raised by four steps—two to three steps above October's eight proposals. Aside from these improvements, the designs remained essentially the same.

Bishop Muench defended the architect's proposal to remove the woodwork and the baldachino. He appealed to "restoring the Cathedral to its 1910 plan," despite the fact that Brown's proposed revisions bear

little resemblance to the basilica's 1910 layout. Enlarged photos of the cathedral's interior during that period were on hand for the meeting. "Did the cathedral look Protestant back then?" the bishop replied to one critic.

David Hyland of Taylor Mill was not persuaded by that argument. "If you look at everything they did," he explained, "every 'upgrade' from 1910 to the present was basically done to sanctify the sanctuary." Brown's present proposals are a clear break from that organic development, he added. "The architects are following some sort of trend that's based on poor theology. This is truly an architectural manifestation of what has happened doctrinally in the Church," he observed. "It doesn't just come down to the question of rearranging the chairs," added Hyland. Victor J. Canfield, an historic preservationist, also opposes the proposals to remove the woodwork and baldachino. "According to the accepted standards of historic preservation, additions and alterations made subsequent to the construction of a building are generally regarded as important to the historic character of the structure. This is especially true when such additions are of artistic, cultural, or historic significance. This would apply to the massive, hand-carved Appalachian oak baldachino," he noted. The baldachino, which so many agree is the most notable of the basilica's treasures, was consecrated in 1950. This qualifies it for continued preservation, noted Canfield. "So too does its spectacular artistry and craftsmanship."

Canfield, who was co-chair of the \$1.5 million restoration of Covington's Mother of God Church, also expressed his misgivings about unnecessarily involving an out-of-state architect in the project. During Mother of God's extensive restoration project, he said, an architect was only involved once, and that was to design the new dome according to the exact specifications of the old one, which was fire-damaged.

"If the Cathedral Basilica is interested in necessary structural repairs and maintenance," stated Canfield, "these are generally supervised by a qualified preservation contractor and volunteer experts. The commissioning of an out-of-town architect on such a significant structure as the Cathedral Basilica could prove a temptation for [Brown] to add his own 'signature' to a renovation—versus restoration—of the present building."

Basilica parishioner Mary Pranger is also concerned with Brown's involvement in the project. Reflecting on the proposals presented in December, Pranger found no evidence to believe that Brown listened to the people at the previous two public meetings. "Mr. Brown came in with his 'canned' plan that he uses in all of his church projects," she said. "This plan was the basis of the conceptual drawings, and thus far, it has turned out to be the end result." Pranger believes little will change in the architect's plans heretofore.

Diane Nuxoll of Glencoe, Ky., feels that the diocese is not even considering leaving the sanctuary untouched, aside from any necessary maintenance work. "It's going to be which of these last two poses you like best," she commented at the December meeting. "It seems there's a conviction in the bishop's mind, that he is not open to suggestions. He's not going to back down. I'd say it's cut-and-dried as far as he is personally concerned."

Nuxoll believes the basilica is a piece of world-class architecture. An estimated 70,000 pilgrims visit Covington's masterpiece each year. "It might not be as famous as the Eiffel Tower or the Great Wall of China," she said, "but people do come from all over the world. You wouldn't knock a couple curves out of the Great Wall of China, would you?"

On the day of the December meeting the diocese announced that it had reached its goal of raising the estimated \$4.7 million allotted to the "restoration project." Brown told reporters that he felt this indicated that Catholics in the Diocese of Covington largely support the proposed renovations. But those present at the December meeting felt differently. Most said that they had no idea they were pledging their money toward a "renovation" project. Bishop Muench was approached by numerous irate Catholics who believe they have been "duped" into donating to the restoration fund under false pretences. The bishop, who seemed very approachable, assumed a defensive posture, emphasizing that no deceit was intended.

During the fund-raising period from August through November of 1999, the diocese consistently advertised the project as one of "preservation, restoration, and refurbishment"—repairing pews, woodwork, murals, stained-glass windows, and cleaning the exterior of 100 years of smog. For those who were not able to attend the public meetings, there was no way for them to know that the plans for preservation had somehow mutated into a full-scale remodeling of the enormous century-old Gothic revival church. Many diocesan priests even felt misinformed about the project at the time they were asked to assist with the fund drive.

"My husband and I feel like we were lied to," said Nuxoll, who contacted the bishop's office to request a refund of her donation towards the \$10 million Faith 2000 campaign, of which 47% is allotted to the

Cathedral's renovation. The diocese, she said, is apparently willing to return her donation.

Joan Jasper of Villa Hills also requested the diocese to return her money. "I had originally planned to donate a thousand dollars because I love the cathedral," she explained. But she was advised by relatives to give only a small amount to begin with, and wait to see how the plans to restore the Cathedral developed. She's glad now she did wait, she admits.

"They lied to me about what they're going to do with my money," said Jasper. "If they're lying to me about this, what else are they lying to me about?" she wondered.

Jasper, a parishioner at St. Joseph in Crescent Springs, said she should have suspected what was going to happen because a similar incident occurred during the renovation of her parish church. "At St. Joseph's they showed us the 'final plans'," she explained. "The tabernacle was going to be on the altar. They collected all the money, and then afterwards they showed us some new final plans." The renovation eventually included moving the tabernacle to the rear of the church, a drastic move in the opinion of many from the Crescent Springs parish. "They already tricked us up there," she lamented. "And now we're being tricked at the cathedral too."

### **Part Three**

Covington Catholics organize to oppose architect's proposals  
Publication date: March 2, 2000

Ever since the idea of renovating Covington's cathedral was introduced last August, opposition to the plans has been growing. Now the resistance has taken an organized form. A group calling itself the Ad Hoc Committee to Save the Cathedral Basilica is petitioning Bishop Robert Muench to desist with his plans to remodel the 90-year-old Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, the mother church for the Diocese of Covington. A March 1 meeting called by the Committee garnered front-page publicity in The Kentucky Post. Committee spokesman, Dr. Arthur M. Kunath, a Fort Thomas rheumatologist, explained the group's intentions: "We respect the authority of the bishop to do what he wants," Kunath told a crowd of around 75 gathered at the Drawbridge Inn that night in Ft. Mitchell. "But as a good bishop, he will listen to his flock," he added.

Save the Cathedral members are circulating a petition in an attempt to gather 5000 signatures by Easter. The petition asks that the Diocese of Covington "maintain the structure, design, and character" of the existing sanctuary "by restoring and refurbishing the architectural features and appointments," rather than remodeling the historic cathedral according to the architect's proposals.

The Ad Hoc Committee has also started a letter-writing campaign to the bishop, and is distributing bumper stickers which read "Save Our Sanctuary." They also plan to hold a candlelight prayer vigil in front of the cathedral sometime during Lent.

### **An overwhelming "no!"**

The Committee's sentiments were echoed in a telephone poll conducted by The Kentucky Post in early March. When asked if the Cathedral Basilica ought to be renovated, northern Kentuckians responded by an overwhelming 7-1 margin, "no!" According to the poll results published in the March 11 Post, callers said they want to see the Basilica repaired and cleaned, but not remodeled and changed.

According to the Post report, Patricia Pace Eschenbach of Burlington explained that when she donated her time to help start the gift shop and museum at the cathedral, she "did it in good faith" because she thought they were going to use the proceeds to "restore" the cathedral. "Now I'm taken aback and hurt by the fact they want to use it for renovation," she told the Post. "It's an historic work of art that should be preserved," she added. "Any type of renovation would be like defacing Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper."

Grace Dillon of Ft. Mitchell also felt that the cathedral ought to be restored not renovated, "except the kneelers should be returned."

Sue Archambault of Burlington voiced her opinion in the phone poll: "If we would make any of those changes, we would be dishonoring and violating the architects, the artists, and the craftsmen who envisioned and created those beautiful artifacts for this one particular cathedral." Marie Bailey, a member of the Cathedral parish for more than 50 years, told the Post she "helped pay to put that beautiful marble down there; so did my mother, and I absolutely don't want to see the sanctuary changed."

Miriam Ware of Southgate said she's also against the changes being proposed—rearranging the seats, moving the altar, and dismantling the baldachino. "When I contributed," she said, "the idea was to clean up and paint up. That's all that needs to be done."

The \$4.7 million project was introduced as a "restoration," and "refurbishment" project, but has since escalated into a full-scale radical remodeling of the church—something which has raised major objections by donors to the initial fundraising campaign. Many have asked the diocese for a refund of their donations.

The bishop is responsible to make the final decisions on the project upon recommendations given to him by the 31-member Cathedral renovation committee. Covington Catholics, in turn, are praying and hoping, that the renovation committee has the decency to listen to so many of the Catholics who have legitimately lodged serious misgivings and objections to the renovation plans. The Cathedral basilica is scheduled to be closed from the Day after Easter, 2001 until Advent for the renovation work. Final decisions on the designs are expected later this year.

#### **Part Four**

Covington bishop silences renovation opposition

Publication date: May 1, 2000

The 30-man renovation Steering Committee has made its recommendations to Bishop Robert W. Muench, and His Excellency has hinted that he will accept their recommendations, which—after much ado by local Catholics—are slightly more conservative than the architect's original plans. Most notably the steering committee recommended that the 40' wooden baldachino that surmounts the high altar be allowed to remain. Bishop Muench and his architect had been advocating that the baldachino, the primary artistic treasure of the church, be dismantled.

Initially, the Bishop of Covington promoted an amenable plan calling for a noble "restoration" (not remodeling) followed by public input sessions designed to make lay members of the diocese feel as if they played an essential role in the project. A pre-ordained plan, designed by veteran church renovator Bill Brown, was trotted out to be ratified by public opinion. But that's not what happened—no ratification was forthcoming. When parishioners and other members of the diocese voiced their strong objections to the architect's proposals to modernize the Basilica, the next public meeting was canceled. When rescheduled, the public meeting took on a different format, one that prevented anyone from making his thoughts and opinions public. Instead, they were asked to write their comments down on 3x5 note cards.

It was obvious that, in the eyes of the diocese, the public was not giving the input they wanted to hear. For this, they were silenced—all the while the diocesan machinery continued to praise Bishop Muench for giving such a generous hearing to his flock. Responding to this silentio, members of the diocese, led by Dr. Arthur M. Kunath, a Fort Thomas physician, formed the Ad Hoc Committee to Save the Basilica. They held an open forum of their own to let the public speak, and they collected nearly 3000 signatures on a petition asking the bishop to honor his advertised proposal to "restore" the historic cathedral—repairing mosaics, murals, and stained glass; improving the lighting and sound system; and restoring the kneelers to the pews. They also specifically objected to the archi-liturgical remodeling changes such as elimination of the present sanctuary, rearrangement of the pews, moving the altar out of the present sanctuary, and constructing a baptismal pool at the church entrance. These controversial changes—the standard fare—were introduced only after Covington Catholics had made financial contributions and pledges. It's the old "bait-and-switch" stratagem.

The petition drive was followed a few weeks later by a prayer vigil on the steps of the Cathedral Basilica. Kunath remarked to the gathered crowd, as well as to the press assembled there that evening, that the Ad Hoc Committee did not view the assembly as a "protest" but as a prayer vigil. The rosary was publicly prayed on the sidewalk outside the bishop's cathedral. There was no antagonism; there was no screaming or moaning about the bishop and his decisions thus far. Rather, Kunath spoke of the efficacy of prayer. He stated clearly that the objective of the prayer vigil was to pray for the bishop, that he may open himself to the graces of his office, and that in the end God's will be done!

The following week, Kunath, representing the 3000 petitioners supporting the goals of the Ad Hoc Committee, delivered the petition to Bishop Muench, who graciously agreed to meet with him. But rather than simply accepting the petition, the bishop verbally ordered Dr. Kunath to cease discussing the subject of the Basilica renovation in public. According to other directors of the Ad Hoc Committee, Dr. Kunath, who had given several interviews to the local media, was effectively "silenced" because Bishop Muench feels he is "a source of division in the Body of Christ." In accordance with the wishes of his bishop, Dr. Kunath would not agree to discuss the meeting on the record. "Until the bishop's restrictions on me have been clarified," he

said, "I have no comment."

One wonders how many laymen the good bishop has silenced in his career. And now, to take the step of censuring the president of the local chapter of Catholics United for the Faith for making known the needs and desires of Covington Catholics in such a measured manner (and in accord with canon law), is inexplicable, unless, of course, the bishop feels that Kunath, being an effective spokesman for disaffected Catholics, has interfered too much with the diocesan fundraising machine.

The issue of the cathedral renovation seems to have escalated to another level. It seems no longer to be about church design ideologies, follies, and fashions, but about authority, manipulation, and abuse. Let's face it: the bishop's stock is low in his diocese. People have said, if we can't trust him on this (in a relatively small matter) what can we trust him with? This is a most unfortunate state of affairs. When a flock loses its trust in its shepherd, the shepherd's right authority is undermined. Sadly, in this case, the bishop seems to have undermined his own authority.

While the incessant and familiar appeal to the "spirit of Vatican II" rings so loud and clear, this appeal can now be seen as it truly is: hollow rhetoric employed to accomplish the whims of its ringers. Now the bell has really tolled. When the laity speak up, when they speak out against blatant abuses of power and object to the arrogance and misinformation proffered by Church officials, then the "spirit of Vatican II" is conveniently dismissed. Truly it is a shame and a scandal that incidents of this sort threaten to overshadow much of the good and faithful work that we trust Bishop Muench has done and will do for his diocese.

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