

Church Renovator Thrives on Manipulation Skills

By Michael S. Rose

Fr. Richard Vosko employs his cookie-cutter renovation program to remodel traditional churches into 'non-church' assembly halls.

*"The incompleteness of the Reformation in terms of architecture was no doubt the result of the longevity of architecture. Buildings stand, and are not easily removed or changed. The 'houses of God' from medieval times continued to stand, continued to assert themselves as "houses of God" because of their strong ecclesiastical character and continued to teach the people around them that there ought to be such a place as a 'house of God.'" —Edward A. Sovik, **Architecture for Worship, 1973***

Father Richard Vosko, Ph.D., a priest of the Diocese of Albany, has been making a comfortable living for the past 29 years, travelling the United States and Canada—parish by parish—promoting his liturgical indoctrination program for the renovation of traditional Catholic churches as well as for the design of new Catholic churches.

He bills himself as a "Designer and Consultant for Worship Environments," and teaches in a Chicago-based training program for the certification of new consultants.

According to a self-promotional "A Short Biography" that he provides to parishes he is "trained in liturgy, the fine arts, and adult education. His research interest has to do with the impact of the built environment on adult behavior patterns."

Not an architect

Although he often gives the air of being a professional architect, he is not. The materials he prepares for parish renovation teams, according to architect William J. Miller of Cincinnati, Oh., "clearly appear to be the kind of material that constitutes a portion of architectural service called 'design programming.'"

Vosko, emphasizes Miller, is not a registered architect. "In effect such acts would seem to constitute the illegal practice of architecture in general appearance."

Miller, who met Vosko at an indoctrination session for St. John the Baptist Church in Harrison, Ohio, raises an interesting point: "For a contract to be legal and binding it must, among other requirements, be for something legal.

In effect a contract for something that is not legal is not binding and enforceable. If a parish, after witnessing Vosko's presentations and upon hearing his recommendations, decided not to pay him, he has no basis in law to collect since he is not licensed to provide the service he renders."

The practice of architecture as defined by the Ohio Administrative Code (4703-1-01-B) "shall consist of rendering or offering to render service to clients, including any one or a combination of the following practices or professional services, such as advice, consultation, evaluation, planning...."

Most other states, says Miller, have similar laws.

Brain-washing and manipulation

Vosko's masquerade attacks the very heart of the Catholic faith.

In an effort to bury the Church visible with newfangled liturgical rhetoric, Father Vosko's modus operandi is predicated on the assumption that he can manipulate parishioners into believing that their own input—ideas of what a parish church building should be—is being taken into consideration in the design of their church.

To this end, diocesan worship committees recommend Fr. Vosko to engineer the whole process that a parish must undergo, to achieve the desired project—which is usually pre-determined before any input is received from parishioners— with little or no resistance from laity.

The fact that bishops and pastors are so ready and willing to "partner" with Fr. Vosko is worrisome to many. Bishop Robert Rose of Grand Rapids, Mich., was quoted in his diocesan paper speaking of Fr. Vosko as

"nationally respected" and "an extremely talented consultant." The bishop stated that his diocese is "fortunate to be partnering with him on [the cathedral renovation] project."

Fr. Vosko and his numerous "certified" disciples, who circulate their ideas and strategies among themselves in liturgical publications such as the FDLC Newsletter and Environment & Art Letter, depend on parishioner ignorance and in some cases apathy to push their ideas through without drawing fatal objection to the smoke-and-mirrors consulting process.

If the project calls for the renovation of an historic church or cathedral, Fr. Vosko is hired to have the parishioners come to the conclusion that their traditional arrangement—with pews, central tabernacle, staturary, shrines, elevated sanctuary, Communion rails, baldacchino, high altar, etc.—is unsuitable for "post-Vatican II" worship, and therefore is unsalvageable as a church building.

"The implications of a Vatican II liturgy," Fr. Vosko wrote in *Through the Eye of a Rose Window: A Perspective on the Environment for Worship*, "will never be realized as long as it continues to be constricted by Vatican I church building."

Judging from numerous campaigns that Fr. Vosko has waged over the years, it would seem that his preference is for a new "parish centrum"—a term significantly free of ecclesiastical connotations—to replace the "outmoded" (in his own words) and intractable church building.

Failing that, Fr. Vosko employs his "cookie-cutter" renovation program to remodel traditional churches into non-church assembly halls, called centurms, with "throw-away" interiors.

These ideas are outlined in a book he recommends to parish building committees called *Architecture for Worship* by Lutheran architect Edward A. Sovik, whose stated goal in his 1973 manifesto is to "finish where the reformation Protestants left off 400 years ago."

If a parish project calls for a new church building, Fr. Vosko leads parishioners to the conclusion that what they need is not a new church but a parish centrum with an assembly hall he calls euphemistically a "worship space."

His preference over the past few years seems to be in favor of a building form which will in no way be confused with the traditional notion of a church. Recent parish centers (i.e., churches) designed under his watch bear more of a resemblance to an upscale library or nursing home, perhaps a suburban hotel. No single form gives any indication from the exterior that the building is even a meeting space or assembly hall, let alone a sacred place of worship. The absence of traditional element such as a bell tower, steeple or cross, prevent the building from "looking like a church."

Ubiquitous consultant

Fr. Vosko is currently performing his consultation charade in at least two Cincinnati parishes: St. Columban in Loveland and St. John's in West Chester.

He has completed "processes" in at least two others—there are probably many more—St. John the Baptist Church in Harrison and St. Charles Borromeo in Kettering.

He is presently involved in the renovation of at least three cathedral churches—in San Antonio, Tx., Grand Rapids, Mich., and Colorado Springs, Colorado. He has won awards for his renovation destruction of St. James Cathedral in Seattle, Wash., and The Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville, Tenn.

In Colorado Springs the cathedral renovation committee, under the glowing approval of Bishop Richard Hanifan, hired Fr. Vosko to give three initial presentations on the finer points of his doctrine. Daniel Kaelin, a retired air force pilot from the Latin Mass community which uses the cathedral on first and third Sundays, feels that Fr. Vosko has "a very narrow conception of the Church."

When Kaelin spoke with Fr. Vosko after his first presentation, the Albany priest told him that he was not going to explain Church history to him. "I'm just going to tell you to look it up," he said, refusing to argue with anyone who had an objection.

"Vosko was arrogant, above anything else," relates Kaelin. "He nearly screamed at me when I confronted him after his first presentation. He told me that the pre-Vatican II Church was 'bigoted, unjust and terrible' and that 'no one ever had a say in anything.'"

Kaelin's overall impression was that Fr. Vosko despised the pre-Vatican II Church as well as the Church now inasmuch as she does not conform with his own concept of what the Church should be—a welcome wagon society—and what she should not be—the ultimate channel of God's grace.

Ultimate irony

Fr. Vosko's comment that in the old church the people never had a say in anything is most ironic.

His own planning process is engineered down to the most minute details. He, for instance, includes plans on how to arrange the seating during his educational indoctrination presentations, to discourage dissent. Fr. Vosko's charade is designed to give the impression that everyone has a "say" in the design process, when in fact the whole project has been designed in Vosko's head before he even arrives at a particular parish.

So many of his new building projects look similar that it is difficult not to arrive at this conclusion.

Most interesting, says Kaelin, is the whole "consultation" process. "It reminds me of the brain-washing techniques the Asians employed during the Korean War," he said. When Kaelin was an Air Force pilot he flew B-52s. During the 1950s the U.S. Air Force offered survival courses to fighter pilots on how to recognize and diagnose brain-washing techniques.

"These are the same techniques employed by Madison Avenue to convince the consumer he needs a particular product," he said—"the same techniques that are used by cults."

Kaelin explained that people are first given bits and pieces of information that are true but not complete. Then doubt is placed in the mind and gradually, after certain bits of false information are repeated so often, they appear as truth.

"If you're a Catholic unfamiliar with the liturgical terrain Fr. Vosko sounds very Catholic, having the glowing support of the bishop and pastor," says Kaelin.

Most pew Catholics, according to Kaelin, accept the authority of a priest. "People in the Church are very trusting of him," he says. With his ingenious techniques, he is usually able to get parishioners to doubt their assumptions and intuitions about the Church, e.g., that a church is a "house of God," a sacred space, a place to worship, etc. In Colorado Springs, says Kaelin, Fr. Vosko convinced his audience that the Church did "get away from the early church; that the Mass was really just a meal and that the priest was no alter Christus; that the Church, in effect has been submerged in a sort of medieval darkness for the past 1500 years."

According to Ian Rutherford, editor of the Catholic Liturgical Library, Fr. Vosko immediately set himself down as an authority by warning his Colorado Springs audience that he will not argue with anyone who might disagree with his views. "Look it up yourselves," Fr. Vosko said. His method is to give the impression he knows everything and that his audience is made up of ignorant do-gooders.

Both Rutherford and Kaelin commented that Fr. Vosko's presentations were "right out of Sovik's book." He even showed photographs, said Rutherford, "of church buildings which were showcased in the Sovik book." People were aghast, said Kaelin, at the site of these modern edifices.

When Fr. Vosko was confronted in 1994 by parishioners at St. John the Baptist Church in Harrison, Oh., he ignored the questions and said "I know what you're doing and it's not right." When parishioner comments became too heated he said, "It seems apparent that I can no longer serve you at this podium tonight." and with that he left.

Vosko had concluded, at a \$15,000 fee to the parish, that Harrison's neo-Gothic church, with its stained glass windows, familiar statues, crucifix and bell tower with real bells that chimed the Angelus, does not "provide an appropriate setting for worship according to the rites and traditions of the Catholic Church."

His reasons? "There are no hospitable gathering areas or toilets in the church building; no adequate space to meet the needs of the different music ministries; no appropriate chapels devoted to the sacrament of reconciliation and the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament; the parking lot is inhospitable" and on and on.

His final recommendation for St. John the Baptist was to ditch the old church building and buy 15 acres on the edge of town to construct a new parish centrum.

At a parish council meeting the next month some parishioners and council members complained that they were put through a charade; parishioners charged that the pastor intended to build a new church before he hired Fr. Vosko as a consultant to provide solutions for renovating the church; that Fr. Vosko was dishonest by pretending that the renovation of St. John's was an option they could consider.

During the previous year Fr. Edward Shine had insisted from the pulpit and in parish bulletins that Fr. Vosko had come to Harrison to help the parish renovate its existing structure. Parishioners later came to find that Fr. Vosko was there to educate parishioners on the need for a new church—one with barrier free restrooms, more parking, a gathering space, seating on three sides of the altar, better lighting, a water cooler, telephone and wide aisles for liturgical dances.

The planning process

Vosko's familiar trademarks include claiming that Vatican II changed the theology of the Mass; asserting that reverence for the tabernacle is an abuse that detracts from Christ's presence in the assembly; appealing to the no-authoritative document Environment & Art in Catholic Worship; and the charade of a consultation process on "renovating" designed to make parishioners feel as if the ideas he puts forth are their own.

The charade begins when the decision is made to renovate or build a new church. A contract is then signed with Father Vosko, often at the recommendation of diocesan worship committee or bishop. A consultation fee of at least \$15,000 is paid to Vosko out of parish funds. This initial fee is paid to Vosko for the work he does in the preliminary stage, in which he will lead the parish to the conclusion that it needs a new church which is suitable for the new liturgy of Vatican II (Although Vatican II created no new liturgy.)

During the second phase of the charade articles appear in the diocesan paper. This begins the conditioning process to brainwash parishioners into accepting major changes to the church. At this point in the process, the pastor's goal (with the help of Vosko) is to bring division to his parish—those who are for the renovation and those who are against. The pastor then sets himself up as the great authority on liturgy and church architecture. Vosko will later help the pastor treat those who oppose the renovation as "liturgical retards" and spiritual midgits, ridiculing their "pre-Vatican II" form of worship.

The parish begins to hear that "change is difficult; change involves conversion; conversion is the Church's business; the parish needs to be converted from exaggerated individualism and private devotion to focus on the assembly and community." The pastor aims to make parishioners feel guilty and, if they are resisting his ideological propaganda (being coached by Vosko), they are made to feel they are being "divisive", working against "unity in the parish" and against "creating a sense of community."

During the third phase the pastor searches for strong advocates in the parish who will support the pastor's predetermined plan for the renovation or new church. These same parishioners will later be placed on the "re-vision" or "renew" committees in an effort to stack the deck against those who oppose the project. The pastor or associate pastor will then hold a series of meetings to give Vosko's teaching on modernist church architecture, explaining why the Church requires moving the tabernacle out of the sanctuary into a side chapel, why chairs must be used instead of pews, why the church needs to be built in the round, why there will be no crucifix and why the cross—which will look like a "plus sign"—will only be brought in during the Mass, why there will be no traditional statues, why the existing statue of the Blessed Virgin should be kept in a closet and only "brought out on special occasions." Then he will attempt to marginalize the opposition as fringe dissidents. This phase is characterized by deliberate misinterpretation of Vatican II and an appeal to the authority of EACW.

In the next phase "revision committees" are set up. Vosko's plan calls for a finance committee, fundraising committee, logistics and hospitality committee, data gathering committee, architect selection committee, publicity and communications committee, art and furnishings committee, music instruments committee, liturgy committee. Each of these then works with Vosko, the pastoral staff and parish council. The whole process is detailed in what Vosko calls "an advanced planning packet," which details the whole charade for those who will be helping—whether they know it or not— with the smoke and mirrors.

The committee structure—"more people doing less"— helps forge the impression that the whole project design process has been democratic and was a community effort. Each committee is charged with special tasks designed to promote the propaganda campaign. For instance, the "publicity and communications committee" is responsible for announcing the renovation process through a specially designed newsletter, publicizing the renovation effort through local media, placing bulletin and pulpit announcements each weekend, inserting the FDLC "educational inserts" into the weekly bulletin, placing posters "throughout the

facility." The committee is also instructed to arrange media interviews with community leaders and consultant if possible.

The parish will then start to hear soundbite-like distortions of the truth, such as "the church will be restored in a way that reflects its original beauty."

During phase five, Vosko arrives on the scene for his "adult education" sessions. (He holds a PhD in "adult education"). His show begins with a "renewal program" designed to undermine the traditional faith of the average pew Catholic. Vosko presents three presentations, including a two part lecture with slides on the development of church art and architecture. Vosko presents parishioners with a wildly distorted conception of the history of the Christian tradition in architecture and sacred art. The purpose of these slide lectures is to ridicule traditionally arranged spaces and to challenge parishioners' notions of what a church should look like—inside and out.

Parishioners are questioned by means of a survey as to how they feel about their faith, and the church itself. They are probed about what they think is wrong with the building. The adult education sessions conclude with an "architectural tour" of modernist churches which fulfill Vosko's program, "in order to learn about what makes a sacred space."

Parishioners are then led to the conclusion that the parish is not celebrating the sacraments according to the "spirit of Vatican II" and that a new church is necessary to meet the needs of the new liturgy.

A "design workshop" entitled "God's House is Our House Too!" is held at the parish. This is the summit of the charade. The workshop is advertised as "a chance to share our ideas for our worship facility with each other. Parishioners are broken up into "small groups," a vote is taken and the results are usually kept secret. Only the pastor and Vosko know the results. A couple weeks later it is announced that the people chose the plan Vosko proposed.

From thereon a renovation committee hand-picked by the pastor is set up to see the project smoothly to its completion. The members of this committee are characterized by their loyalty to the pastor, rather than to their faith or their church. They are indoctrinated to act as apologists for the project and taught to quote from EACW, which they are told is "Church law." (it is not)

Euphemistic language

Many alert parishioners are disturbed by the terminology that Vosko uses. He glibly employs the tactic of changing the names of things to eliminate the traditional concepts associated with certain words. For example, parishioners need not be "educated" as much as they need to undergo a "process of formation."

By allowing Vosko to change the names of things or redefine the meaning of words, he is able to get parishioners to speak on his own terms. For example, the various committees under the tutelage of Vosko, quickly adopt the term "worship space" in place of "church." Church, apparently, is too traditional sounding for Vosko and confreres.

The altar becomes a 'eucharistic table' and we no longer have a priest who leads us at Mass, we have a 'presider.' Since priests traditionally offer sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as in various pagan traditions, Vosko would like Catholics to forget that a priest is one who offers sacrifice and that an altar is a place on which sacrifice is offered.

Contempt for the Church

Father Vosko often begins his indoctrination sessions—as he did recently in Colorado Springs—with an anecdote about a Sufi mystic:

"There was once a Sufi mystic who had a cat that he would take with him when he conducted his service in their place of worship. The cat would too often get frisky and distract the worshippers. So the mystic took the cincture from around his waist and tied it around the cat which he then tied to the leg of the table. Thereafter, before each service he would tie the cat to the table with his cincture. This went on for years. When that cat died, he got another. This cat was also tied to the table with the cincture. More years passed and the Sufi mystic died. The next mystic decided he would get a cat and so he did and he also tied the cat to the leg of the table. Hundreds of years later people were writing dissertations about the significance of the cat being tied to the table."

Vosko's point? "A lot of cats have been added to the liturgy and no one has questioned it." Vosko then goes

on to explain that since sacred objects such as statues and stone altars were not used by Christians of the first century, we ought not use them in the 20th or 21st century. Pope Pius XII characterized this type of thinking as a heresy called "archeologism"—an inordinate desire to return to some time in the distant past, which seems to be an ideal era for the Church, in terms of how the faith was expressed, while disregarding the intermediate years.

"When did all the pomp and ceremony come into our religion when Jesus Christ started it all at a dining room table?" asks Vosko

"Why does the priest dress up in such a way today when for the first 3-4000 years priests' clothes were exactly like the clothes of the assembly?"

Vosko blames it on the imperial courts.

In a presentation to St. Therese Church in Succasunna, New Jersey —this author's former parish—Vosko lets his true colors show. Ridiculing adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Vosko has this to say:

"One reason why our churches are so susceptible to crime is because they are empty during the week. Maybe people who have organized vigils before the sacrament—that's a wonderful practice to keep vigil—to take turns keeping vigil over the Blessed Sacrament that is primarily saved to take to the sick and dying—that is what the Church teaches us. I think that's a wonderful practice, to take turns keeping watch, just in case your mother or father needs Holy Communion on their death bed. Wouldn't it be nice to know that you can go to the tabernacle and find the Body of Christ in it?"

In the same indoctrination session, Vosko reveals a shallow understanding of the Catholic faith and scripture. He told parishioners that the fundamental reason for our religion is "to help to make the world a better place to live in. I mean that's the bottom line of all this; it's the only thing Jesus taught us how to do."

Perhaps his contempt for Christianity is best understood by his "life's too short" comments delivered in a church in New Hampshire:

"I look out at you and I'm kind of wondering—are you worrying about the snowstorm or... Some people even look mad. Life's too short. Lighten up a little bit. There's nothing about life that's so serious to be mad or angry, you know. What we're looking at here is that Christianity, like everything else, is a fact of life. You're all going to go to Heaven when you die anyway, so, I mean, you know, God saved us, Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. It's done, ladies and gentlemen. All you got to do is mind your manners and be good and you're going to go to Heaven. So what's the big deal? Who cares where this statue is placed and where that tabernacle is placed or how the seats are arranged, or where the altar is, or how big the church looks, or how pretty it is. Is that going to have anything to do with whether you go to heaven or hell?"

The point is, it matters terribly: That is why Vosko has made a fortune —some say he has become a millionaire several times over—scamming Catholics in the service of liturgy deconstructionists.

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