

Church Restoration, Re-Renovation and the Third Millennium

By Michael S. Rose

A new trend is emerging. Some of the churches that were drastically altered decades ago are now being “re-renovated” to reflect their original designs.

When Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan returned to Worcester, Massachusetts after the Second Vatican Council, one of the first ways he sought to implement the “spirit of Vatican II” was by remodeling his cathedral church. No doubt influenced by the spirit of change that swept through Western society during the tumultuous sixties, he oversaw the removal of the sacred furnishings that had come to be universally identified with the Catholic sanctuary. In place of the reredos and high altar, a concrete block wall was erected. A simple freestanding altar table was introduced. The communion rail was removed, and a new, unadorned tabernacle was set upon a pillar in a side alcove.

The parish churches of the Worcester diocese followed suit over the next decade and beyond. Much the same trend occurred throughout the United States and elsewhere. The renovations that immediately followed the Council were arguably the most drastic. Altars, statues, shrines, communion rails, confessionals, and kneelers were removed from many churches. Walls and ceilings were whitewashed—murals and frescoes succumbed to the roller. Innumerable works of sacred art were lost while new features such as wall-to-wall carpeting and drop ceilings were introduced— all done in the name of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

Yet, in reality, the church renovators of those years merely acted on their own subjective desires rather than on the authority of the Council fathers. In fact, the Council had precious little to say about the architectural reform of our churches. Rather, Vatican II was dishonestly used as the catalyst for the reformation of Catholic church architecture. Addressing this abuse, the Vatican issued *Opera Artis*, a circular letter on the care of the Church’s artistic heritage, in 1971. It charged: “Disregarding the warnings and legislation of the Holy See, many people have made unwarranted changes in places of worship under the pretext of carrying out the reform of the liturgy and have thus caused the disfigurement or loss of priceless works of art.” In this document the Sacred Congregation for Clergy warned bishops to “exercise unflinching vigilance to ensure that the remodeling of places of worship by reason of the reform of the liturgy is carried out with utmost caution.”

Unfortunately this instruction was little heeded by those who engineered the church renovations during the following decades. The liturgical renovation movement actually accelerated. Some years later, the same renovators could also be found remodeling church naves and vestibules, rearranging the pews, and moving or eliminating the sanctuaries of the older, traditional churches. Throughout the sixties and early seventies various theories based on architectural Modernism were promoted by the church renovators. Those theories came to be embodied in *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, the 1978 document drafted by a subcommittee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. This document seemed to ratify both the theory and the practice of the church renovation establishment. Consequently, the architectural patrimony of the Church in the United States continued to suffer dearly.

Happily, however, it now seems that a new trend is emerging. Some of the churches that were drastically altered decades ago are now being “re-renovated.” Shortly after Bishop Daniel P. Reilly was appointed Bishop of Worcester in 1994, he announced an interior restoration project that would “re-renovate” or restore the cathedral’s sanctuary. The concrete block wall was removed, and an ornate hand-carved wood reredos and a noble cathedra were erected in its place. The tabernacle alcove was similarly adorned and a shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe was fashioned from the leftover wood of the sanctuary project.

Numerous churches, from small rural parishes to urban cathedrals, are undergoing similar restorations. St. Patrick’s Church in Forest City, Missouri, for instance, is at present undergoing a re-renovation to bring it more in line with its original look. Following Vatican II, this 95-year old church was “modernized” by way of a drop ceiling and wood-paneled walls. The Stations of the Cross, the old altar, several statues, and other sacred furnishings were removed from the church. In 1999, however, the new pastor, Father Joseph Hughes, initiated the re-renovation. Fortunately, some parishioners had saved items that were removed from the church during the previous renovation some thirty years ago. A sanctuary lamp, the old tabernacle, and candlesticks were refurbished and incorporated into the new design. Just as at St. Paul’s Cathedral in Worcester, a new reredos is the highlight of the sanctuary renovation. Patterned after the church’s old altar, it sits behind the new altar and holds the altar crucifix and statuary.

Other pastors have made simpler “re-renovation” changes, such as moving the tabernacle back to its

original position in the center of the sanctuary, behind the altar. Two years ago, for instance, Father Richard Simon of St. Thomas of Canterbury Church in Chicago, announced to his parish that he planned to make such a liturgical move because he felt that the experiment of removing the tabernacle from the sanctuary had failed. "We have lost the sense of the sacred that formerly was the hallmark of Catholic worship," he wrote to parishioners in a letter of June 24, 1997. "Therefore, I have decided to restore the tabernacle to its former place in the middle of the sanctuary and to begin a campaign of re-education as to the sacredness of worship and the meaning of the Real Presence." Once Fr. Simon returned the tabernacle to its former location he was surprised, he said, at the response. It was overwhelmingly positive and effective. "Some people even wept for joy when they saw the change," he said. "I'm kicking myself and asking why I didn't do this years ago."

In Indianapolis, Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein, O.S.B. is less than pleased with the renovation of his cathedral, which was carried out under his predecessor. As part of the renovation of the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul, most of the statues and the Stations of the Cross were removed and sold to an antique store in Michigan (not allowed by Opera Artis). Since being named Ordinary of the Indianapolis Archdiocese, the archbishop has already ordered a new set of Stations of the Cross, the first step in what will be a much slower process of re-renovation in Indianapolis.

Ongoing liturgical revolution

But not everyone is "re-renovating." The artistic heritage of many churches is still threatened by those who, in the words of Msgr. Peter J. Elliot, still cling to "a kind of 'Maoist' mythology of a perpetual or ongoing liturgical revolution," one that is derived from "a dated commitment to a permanent program of planned changes rather than to organic and natural development."¹

It seems that the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is now being used as the catalyst for renovation of some of the most significant parish churches, cathedrals, and basilicas in the country, many of them historic structures thus far preserved from the fashionable post-Vatican II renovations. At this writing the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption in Covington, Kentucky, the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, St. John Cathedral in Milwaukee, St. Andrew Cathedral in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the Cathedral of St. Mary in Colorado Springs are all in the midst of renovations, to help their respective dioceses "move into the new millennium," but not without artistic and spiritual casualties. Each of these cathedral churches is being subjected to a similar program of interior remodeling justified by the "ongoing liturgical revolution."

Moving or extending a sanctuary into the nave has almost become customary for American church renovators when working with older, historic church buildings. This move is often justified by the liturgical theory that a more centralized sanctuary makes it easier for the congregation to "gather around" the altar. This new type of sanctuary is not without its ramifications for the church as a whole. The movement of the altar (or the entire sanctuary) often "necessitates" removing the altar rail, displacing or removing the high pulpit, and in the case of a cathedral the bishop's throne may also be affected. These traditional furnishings are then replaced with modern furnishings that are often at odds with the original design and style of the building. Victor Hugo dubbed these innovative furnishings the "wretched gewgaws of a day." Referring to elements of the 18th century renovation of Notre Dame de Paris he asked, "Who has substituted for the old Gothic altar, splendidly loaded with shrines and reliquaries, that heavy sarcophagus of marble, with angels' heads and clouds, which looks like an unmatched specimen from the Val-de-Grâce or Les Invalides!"²

Gewgaws

In 1999 historic St. Martin of Tours Church in Cincinnati, an Italian Romanesque-style edifice built in the 1920s, was renovated over the overwhelming objections of parishioners. In St. Martin's case, fashion audaciously fitted into the wounds of its Romanesque architecture wretched gewgaws of our own day—its stage platform, its rearranged pews, its emasculated baldachino, and so forth, all because it was felt that the altar and sanctuary needed to be brought closer to the people. The tabernacle was removed from the high altar, while the communion rail and two of the parish's four wood confessionals were cannibalized in order to make new furnishings. The latter move, apparently, was suggested as a way to appease critics of the renovation.

Another prominent and historic Cincinnati church, St. Francis Xavier, provides an even more striking example of a renovation gone "gewgaw." This immense Gothic-style church suffered much the same planned program as did St. Martin's. But in this case, the interior of the church was painted a dark shade of blue to effect the look of marble, and the contemporary furnishings (altar, ambo, font, light fixtures, etc.) look as though they were transplanted from a mod-style library or theater. The contrast between the Gothic architectural forms (barrel vaults, pointed arches, and soaring columns) and the sharp, hard lines of the new fixtures creates an awkward visual dissonance that is disturbing even to the casual observer.

Similarly, when architects presented a plan to renovate St. James Cathedral in Seattle, they said they were going to “reclaim the historical integrity of the church.” Seattle Catholics wondered for some time what exactly was meant by this unique turn-of-phrase. They were assured that the “beauty and integrity of an old and venerable structure” would be respected. According to critics of the Seattle renovation, once the project was completed they no longer had an Italian Renaissance church, but a “Reformation-era church taken over by Reformers who didn’t want any ‘popish artifacts’.” It is still a beautiful building, like a museum or the U.S. Capitol, but it is no longer easily understood as a house of God with recognizable transcendent qualities.

There are, however, some notable contemporary exceptions, such as the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City. The architects here obviously took great pains to choose designs for the new furnishings that would complement, rather than detract from, the magnificent hundred-year-old edifice. Overall, the Salt Lake renovation project produced a unified structure, although one which adopted a decidedly late-twentieth-century arrangement.

Inclusivism

Another justification for some of the modernizing elements of contemporary church renovations is by way of accessibility, flexibility, and visibility. Retrofitting church buildings for handicap accessibility is becoming ever more en vogue. While the simple premise—to make the church building accessible for those who are either wheel-chair bound or otherwise physically disabled from climbing stairs—is a noble and commendable one, “accessibility” has become more of an ideology than a helpful aid. This new ideology of “inclusivism” necessitates costly elevators rising to the choir loft or having the choir moved out of the loft, modern ambos that rise and fall powered by hydraulics, lowered sanctuaries accessible by long ramps, the removal of large sections of pews, and tabernacles that are low enough to the ground so that a wheel-chair bound minister of the Eucharist can access the sacred Hosts.

Related to the ideology of accessibility, the desire for “flexibility” is also often invoked to justify radical revision of church interiors, especially regarding the seating. The renovation of the Indianapolis cathedral, for instance, disposed of the traditional pews with kneelers to make room for portable chairs (with “kneeling pillows” tied to the back of the chair). According to Sr. Sandra Schweitzer, design consultant on the project, “flexibility” is one of the most important considerations in renovating traditional churches. In a 1999 interview with the National Catholic Register, Sr. Schweitzer contended, contrary to 1500 years of evidence, that the variety of liturgies—weddings, funerals, baptisms—cannot be accommodated by the “traditional church arrangement” with its uni-directional fixed pews, choir seating, etc.³ To replace these with movable or even stackable chairs allows for different new seating configurations for various liturgies or special feastdays... Again, often good quality seating is jettisoned, and flexibility becomes an excuse for a reordering of the nave and sanctuary into more of a theater or abbey choir configuration. “Visibility” too is fast becoming an ideology that has produced some of the strangest solutions yet. When pews cannot be removed or rearranged on three or four sides of the altar, for example, some architects have skewed the pews in the side aisles seven to ten degrees toward the altar so that people can better face the altar and see the faces of other worshippers. This solution can be seen in several prominent churches such as the Cathedral of St. Peter in Erie, Pennsylvania. For many, it is terribly awkward to sit skewed by seven to ten degrees for the duration of a Sunday Mass. Another feature of some of these renovations, accomplished in the name of visibility, is the lowering of the sanctuary reredos or the shaving down of the ends of the pews.

Unpopular with the laity

All of the above-mentioned changes are significant in that they are often not popular with the average man in the pew, who is ultimately footing the bill for these projects. As a greater awareness of renovation issues grows it is becoming more common for parishioners to openly object to proposed changes to their historic church buildings.

Probably the greatest resistance ever effected by a single parish is that of St. Francis Xavier Church in Petoskey, Michigan. Parishioners there who would like to see their beautiful church protected and preserved have organized to formally oppose the renovation plans which will radically transform their Gothic-style building into a spartan “worship space.” The church still boasts numerous ornate frescoes, elaborate carvings, a marble-topped altar railing, elevated pulpit, stunning reredos with a life-size crucifix and gilded tabernacle. Its 27 statues and 24 stained glass windows render this church one of the finest examples of neo-Gothic architecture in the Midwest. One of the most drastic of the proposed changes at St. Francis is the removal of the reredos (see photo) and the elimination of the parish’s perpetual adoration chapel.

In March of 1999 parishioners who want to preserve St. Francis for future generations formed an association called the St. Francis Xavier Historic Preservation Guild, with 12 parishioners taking the lead. The guild

publishes a newsletter that is distributed to their more than 600 members, uniting them in their common cause.

In April the guild mailed a survey to all registered parishioners and more than 700 were returned. By overwhelming margins, the people opposed moving the tabernacle (720 to 10), removing the communion rail (695 to 33), removing statues or the reredos (715 to 14) and moving the altar forward (677 to 39). The majority did support minor restoration such as painting and cleaning walls, replacing old carpet, restoring statues where necessary, and making improvements to the exterior of the building.

Since parish leaders seemed to turn a deaf ear to the reasonable protest, more than 900 St. Francis parishioners signed a petition to cease renovation plans. This petition with its signatures was published as a paid advertisement in the local daily.

Parishioners at St. Edmund Church in Oak Park, Illinois, took a different tack. First they commissioned an alternative design for the church which would accomplish the majority of the stated reasons for the renovation without affecting the historical integrity of the sanctuary. After petitions to the parish and the Archdiocese of Chicago failed, the St. Edmund Preservation Society asked the Oak Park Historic Preservation Committee to grant "landmark status" to the historic Chicago-area church, arguing that the proposed renovation there will change the character of the English Gothic structure. Landmark status would require the church to seek village approval on any work altering the building. Oak Park's elected officials, however, voted against granting the church such status.

Other parishes have even tendered appeals to the Roman Rota and the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship, after appeals to the pastor and the diocese failed. The preservation group at Cincinnati's St. Martin's Church, for instance, assembled a three-inch-thick dossier of renovation-related materials in an effort to have the Vatican intervene on their behalf. Two separate appeals have already failed, a third is still pending.

Material costs

Many have often wondered too about the material costs of these renovations, and whether or not the money spent on the unnecessary alterations is poor stewardship and an affront to social justice. Renovation of a single structure can cost upwards to \$4 million but most run anywhere between \$200,000 and \$1 million.

To think of the material costs in purely hypothetical terms, we could estimate (conservatively) that 75% of the 17,156 parish churches that existed in the U.S. in 1962 were renovated. If the altars and communion rails alone were removed from these churches at just \$10,000 per building, that would mean that 12,867 churches were renovated at a total cost of \$128,670,000. This figure, of course, does not include other changes, often unwanted and unnecessary, such as moving tabernacles to side chapels, building baptismal fonts designed for adult immersion and moving choirs and organ consoles to where sanctuaries used to be. It also does not include the 2,428 parishes created between 1962 and 1999 or older buildings that have been renovated more than once. When all this is considered the rough estimate of dollars spent on church renovations since 1962 must well exceed \$200,000,000. The cost in lost art and history is, of course, incalculable.⁴

The dawn of the new millennium provides an opportune time for architects and church renovation professionals to evaluate the untoward results of the past four decades. With hindsight we can all now better understand the Vatican's prophetic warning issued in 1971. With the growing appreciation of traditional sacred art and architecture, especially among the some of the younger, recently appointed bishops, as well as the young priests who have been emerging from our seminaries over the past few years, more and more parishes will be open to the possibility of "re-renovation" or conservation and preservation of their architectural and artistic heritage.

Not long after Victor Hugo published his classic novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, architect Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc spearheaded Notre Dame's famous re-renovation in the mid-19th century. Stained glass windows were reinstalled, new statues sculpted to fill the empty niches, the white-wash scrubbed from the walls, and on and on. Let us hold out hope that the 21st century will occasion a similar restoration of the architectural patrimony of the Church, and that this restoration will lead to a greater awakening of faith and devotion, one that will lead us pilgrims to our Father's House, the New Jerusalem. Good architects will be able to find creative solutions that preserve the old art, protect the integrity of the architecture, and maintain a sacral atmosphere.

Notes

1 Monsignor Peter J. Elliot, Liturgical Question Box, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998, p.16.

2 Victor Hugo, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, 1831.

3 Michael S. Rose, "Can Modern Churches Be Beautiful?" National Catholic Register, June 13-19, 1999.

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