

Preserving our Patrimony, Protecting our Faith

By Michael S. Rose

There is a connection between the Church's patrimony and the Catholic faith.

The following is a lecture delivered to the Christifidelis Colloquium at the Yale Club in New York City on May 12, 2001.

Last Fall, the liberal journal *US Catholic*, published a review of my book *The Renovation Manipulation*, incidentally without ever mentioning either my name or the name of the book—I'm sure U.S. Catholic was not keen on giving me free advertising. In that review, journalist Robert McClory had this to say:

"There are many issues about which Catholics disagree these days—birth control, divorce and remarriage, sex education in schools, the ordination of women, the rights of homosexuals, the silencing of theologians, to name a few. Yet all these hot buttons cool to relative insignificance compared with one issue capable of generating white hot incandescence among the faithful: church renovation!"

While it is arguable whether or not McClory's so-called "hot button" issues are really so hot, I can attest to the fact that the subject of church renovations makes nostrils flare, fists pound, and tempers erupt. Unlike issues such as divorce or homosexuality. When a church renovation plan is announced at any given parish, you can be assured that the project will affect the entire parish as few projects do.

After beginning to chronicle the recent reform of Catholic church architecture, a few years ago I posed a simple question to myself: Are the church renovations of the last thirty-some years—the interior manipulations of sacred architecture—are they for faith or for fad? Are they effected to deepen our faith or are they effected for the sake of theological or artistic fashion?

To explore this question I found Victor Hugo's comments in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, written in 1831 very insightful. I want to read briefly from a page in my book that addresses his comments:

"[Hugo] explains that the ruin of his beloved Notre Dame was precipitated by three forces: 1. Time, which 'has gradually made deficiencies here and there, and has gnawed over its whole surface'; 2. 'Violence, brutalities, contusions, fractures - these are the works of revolutions.' This is the type of destruction, wrote Hugo, wrought by indiscriminate revolutionary violence; and 3. Fashion, which Hugo contested, has done more mischief than revolutions: 'It has cut to the quick - it has attacked the very bone and framework of the art'.... Fashion was perpetrated by 'school-trained architects, licensed, privileged, and patented, degrading with all the discernment of and selection of bad taste.'"

What I conclude then is that with regard to the subject of contemporary church architecture, we have been long experiencing another "crisis of fashion." And Catholics are at the mercy of the arbiters of this fashion.

"The school-trained architects—licensed, privileged and patented, degrading with all the discernment and selection of bad taste" are fondly known to us as liturgical design consultants. I cannot think of a better description for them than this one Hugo penned 170 years ago!

Now, to help understand this crisis of fashion I would like to give some historical background, starting just after World War I.

Early trends

The post-conciliar church renovation movement has its roots in the experimental churches of the 1920's through the 50's—decades before the Council. Up until that time Catholic church architecture in the U.S. was predicated more or less on the Catholic counter-reformation model of the 16th century. I'm not talking here about a specific style, such as Baroque or "the Spanish Jesuit style," but a particular arrangement that allowed considerable diversity. Nevertheless, these churches asserted themselves as houses of God through their permanence, their verticality, and their iconography.

The artisans of those churches expressed their faith—the Incarnational faith of Catholicism—by means of:

- elaborate high altars and tabernacles
- special niche and aisle shrines dedicated to the saints

- prominent pulpits for preaching; and
- an abundance of art in stained glass, sculpture, murals, and mosaics

These churches were designed with transcendence in mind—bringing the Heavenly Jerusalem down to us. They were designed as permanent structures; and they were not conceived simply as gathering places, but as visible churches that show Christ to be present and active in their particular locales. The architects of these churches looked to the works of their predecessors in order to shed light on their own work. By the same token, these same architects realized that they were not designing only for their own day, but for all generations yet to come. They transcended mere fashion.

The experiments in form, especially in the 1940's and 50's, although still making attempts at transcendent architecture, discarded this model in favor of a Modernist approach. An essential tenet of Modernism was the necessity of breaking with the past. Consequently, there was virtually a complete break with the history and tradition of church architecture. The churches of previous centuries, even the most noble of structures, were deemed irrelevant by an elite corps of Church liturgists and architects who would have greater influence in the years to come.

The post-war building boom of the 50's saw the construction of many new churches as parishes grew and the Church greatly increased in numbers throughout the country. The churches built in this brief era were diverse in their designs, but many were obviously disconnected with the tradition of Catholic architecture, reflecting more a Protestant or secular influence.

This is the era that introduced us to the giant sea shell churches, those that resembled sailboats, arks, and other nautical themes; rocket ships, lunar landing pods, beehives, teepees, water treatment plants, and various shapes of origami. To avoid the old basilica-style arrangement of the church interior, the architects drew up the new plans based on theaters, auditoria, and in some cases even the three-ring circus.

One of the main archi-liturgical theories of the day used to justify these new designs was based on what Pope Pius XII condemned as “antiquarianism,” also translated as “archeologism.” In fact, as early as 1947, the Holy Father addressed this issue in his encyclical *Mediator Dei*. He wrote:

Mediator Dei, Pope Pius XII, 1947

The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But... it is neither wise nor laudable to reduce everything to antiquity by every possible device. Thus, to cite some instances, one would be straying from the straight path were he to wish the altar to be restored to its primitive table form; or ... were he to order the crucifix so designed that the divine Redeemer's body shows no sign of His cruel sufferings... Unwise and mistaken is the zeal of one who in matters liturgical would go back to the rites and usage of antiquity, discarding new patterns introduced by disposition of divine Providence to meet the changes of circumstances and situation.

This is what was already being done in the 1940's, especially in Europe. The newfangled church designs were justified by the architects and liturgical theorists—led by the Benedictines—by appealing to this notion of “antiquarianism.” They actually claimed—and some still do—that we ought to return to the house churches of the centuries before Constantine, when Christian worship was publicly forbidden.

With that in mind I would like to launch into what I call the three generations of renovation justification: the three generations of renovation justification.

The Second Vatican Council

1962-1965: The Second Vatican Council gave this archi-liturgical elite a new opportunity. They capitalized on the spirit of change that swept through Western society during the tumultuous 60's and applied this spirit to the Council, which falsely and dishonestly became their catalyst for the reformation of Catholic church architecture. No longer were they limited to constructing new modernist churches; they quickly found that they could now invoke the Council to advocate structural reform of existing churches—our traditional churches.

This is what I'm identifying as the first generation of “justification” for the renovation of Catholic churches.

Sacred furnishings that had come to be universally identified with the Catholic sanctuary were suddenly removed. Simple freestanding tables were re-introduced to serve as altars.

These renovations that immediately followed the Council were arguably the most drastic. High 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 half-height concrete block walls, wall-to-wall carpeting and drop ceilings were introduced— all done falsely in the name of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

In reality, though, 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 architecture of our churches. And it certainly did not advocate an architectural reform.

What little it did say can be distilled down to this quote from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the 1963 Council document on Sacred Liturgy:

In the course of the centuries [the Church] has brought into being a treasury of art which must be very carefully preserved... Ordinaries [that is, bishops] must be very careful to see that sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or allowed to deteriorate; for they are the house of God.

Despite these words, the renovators steered their own course; and as I have said, this first wave of renovations was falsely justified by the Council, which stated the opposite of what the renovators actually did.

After several years of hearing stories of churches ransacked by the archi-liturgical squads of the day, 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. Mindful of the legislation of Vatican Council II and of the directives in the documents of the Holy See, bishops are to exercise unfailing vigilance to ensure that the remodeling of places of worship by reason of the reform of the liturgy is carried out with the utmost caution.

This was the second clear warning to bishops on the preservation of church art and architecture. So naturally the Vatican nipped it in the bud back in 1971 and stopped the onslaught of drastic church remodeling, right?

Wrong!

Unfortunately this instruction was little heeded by those who engineered the church renovations during the following decade. *Opera Artis* had little noticeable effect in the U.S. 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 change-oriented archi-liturgical theories were promoted and implemented by the church renovators. One of the gurus of the time was Protestant architect E.A. Sovik.

He was not the only one and I don't mean to single him out except that he was good enough to shamelessly enunciate these fashionable theories in his 1973 book *Architecture and Worship*, which is still recommended by the liturgical design crowd to this day. Not only does Sovik provide practical guidelines for renovation of both Protestant and Catholic churches, he discloses his motivation and his desired results: to continue where the Protestant reformation left off 400 years ago. Here is Sovik's thesis in his own words (notice his appeal to antiquarianism):

When the Protestant and Catholic reformations of the 16th century came, the architectural forms that resulted were only partially corrective. The destruction of images and relics and the rearrangement of furniture in the existing buildings, and the sharp contrasts of form that appeared in some of the few places of worship built in those times, did not effectively bring the minds of churchmen back into harmony with the minds of the early church... The incompleteness of the Reformation in terms of architecture was no doubt the result of the longevity of the architecture... The houses of God from medieval times continued to stand, to assert themselves as 'houses of God' because of their strong ecclesial character, and continued to teach the people around them that there ought to be such a place as a house of God.

Sovik opines that neither Jesus nor the Fathers of the Church wanted any such edifice and we should work toward the elimination of such a "misguided medieval pattern." Again, note the appeal to antiquarianism here.

The Non-church

To move beyond this misguided medieval pattern, Sövik argues for the return of what he calls the "non-church," or a "house of the people," which he defines as a structure which should not be a church but simply a place through which the people of the church can minister—sort of like a ministry clinic, I suppose. Sovik will not even use the term "church," and instead advocates the use of the term "centrum" because it is free from all ecclesial connotations.

Throw-away interior

Sövik then goes on to say he wants a "throw-away" interior for his centrum. He writes: "For the space itself must be simple, allowing for many configurations of use. And the furnishings and symbolic devices will be portable, so they may be varied, replaced, augmented or abandoned as the parishioners of future times desire." In other words, he is no advocate of permanence, which is an important attribute of the universal Church that had until the 20th century been reflected in the design of church architecture. Rather, Sovik obviously follows the Los Angeles mentality, where architects design a building to last but a dozen or so years, when they figure it will be bulldozed to make way for a newer and trendier building.

How then should one properly design the throw-away interior of a centrum which will not be mistaken by anyone to be a "church" or a "holy place" or a "house of God"? Well, Sövik proposes the following five practical guidelines:

1. Remove the pews and replace them with portable chairs;
2. Set up a separate room to reserve the eucharistic species (if necessary at all);
3. Remove any artwork which might be construed as strictly religious in content, e.g., religious statues or icons;
4. Eliminate the traditional sanctuary by bringing the "table"—no longer an altar— into the congregation and arranging the chairs around the table;
5. Eliminate the use of crucifixes and Latin crosses in favor of portable Greek crosses ("plus signs") which would be used only in processions and during the liturgy.

Many Catholics will recognize Sövik's proposal as the same basic scheme which has been used repeatedly in the renovation of their churches since the 1960's.

His archi-liturgical ideology of secularizing the sacred was en vogue among Catholic liturgists during the mid-1970's as it is today. Sövik and kindred spirits such as Frank Kaczmarcik, Robert Hovda, and Richard Vosko—all Catholic priests—were caught up in the liturgical experimentation of the late 1960's and early '70's. Their penultimate goal was the elimination of the sacred from church architecture, their ultimate goal, the elimination of the church building itself.

1978

Remarkably, 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.

The document is generally accepted as primarily the work of one man: Father Robert Hovda. The late Father Hovda wrote the foreword to a book written by one of Sovik's cronies, Theodor Filthaut. This 1968 book, Church Architecture and Liturgical Reform, along with Sovik's book, is a foretaste of EACW, a document which plainly ratified both the theory and the practice of the church renovation establishment, dominated by men such as Sovik, Hovda, and Filthaut.

Consequently, the architectural patrimony of the Church in the United States continued to suffer dearly.

This constitutes the second generation of renovation justification. Thousands of churches were justified on the guidelines set forth in EACW, which were promoted as a set of mandated directives—which it was not! It has been consistently trotted out by LDCs as the renovation bible.

I like what Bishop Thomas Doran wrote last year in an endorsement for my book. He wrote: "Not a few wags have remarked that it is easier to get a dispensation from the divine eternal law than from EACW, a statement which seems to have flown under false colors from the very moment of its appearance."

It wasn't until the 1990's—amazingly—that the authority of EACW was called into question repeatedly in print. To remedy this, the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions—a prime agent of archi-liturgical reform—asked the NCCB to consider a revised version of EACW that could later be ratified by the entire body of U.S. bishops. But instead of revising EACW, the NCCB decided to commission a completely new document on church architecture, one that would first become known as *Domus Dei*, which was rewritten after a first draft of the document was not well received by the bishops in November of 99. The title of the document which was approved last November is *Built of Living Stones*, or as I like to call it: *Sticks and stones may break my bones*. The document, in my opinion, while being objectively better than EACW is not a helpful document. It will not on its own merits inspire the design of beautiful churches, nor will it prevent the radical renovation of the few traditional churches we have left. (And by the way, Manhattan is blessed to have many beautiful—some untouched—churches left. That's certainly more than we can say in the Midwest.)

Inclusivism

This brings us to the third wave of justification, in which we now see the renovators have become retrofitters in an effort to make the church an "inclusive" structure. When parishioners now call into question the authority of EACW—which liturgical consultants still appeal to—the renovators respond with a justification based on inclusivity, an appeal to a particularly nauseating form of political correctness.

This inclusivity is accomplished now by way of accessibility, flexibility and visibility.

Accessibility

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—while this premise is a noble and commendable one, "accessibility" has become more of an ideology than a helpful aid. This relatively 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.

Flexibility

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 (without kneelers). According to Sr. Sandra Schweitzer, liturgical consultant on the project, "flexibility" is one of the most important considerations in renovating traditional churches.

I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing her about two years ago. 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, and so forth. To replace these with movable or even stackable chairs allows for different new seating configurations for various liturgies or special feastdays. So claims this entrepreneurial nun, who runs her own liturgical design studio, apart from her religious community. The same approach is being taken with the Milwaukee cathedral, under the guidance of Richard Vosko—who, by the way, happens also to be guiding the way for renovation of cathedrals in San Antonio, Rochester, and St. Petersburg Florida as well as the new cathedral in Los Angeles.

In any event, for Vosko, Schweitzer and the rest of the archi-liturgical masters, flexibility becomes an excuse for a reordering of the nave and sanctuary into more of a theater or abbey choir configuration as advocated by Sovik and his cronies as well as by EACW. By the way, Schweitzer revealed that Sovik had helped in the remodeling of the Indianapolis cathedral, which the good folks in Indiana say was "sacked."

Visibility

The third approach is an appeal to the "visibility dogma." Visibility is used as a justification for bringing the altar out into the midst of the congregation and arranging the chairs around what looks like a table. "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 and cathedrals. 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. One particularly unfortunate application of the visibility dogma produced the dozens of television screens which have attached themselves to the pillars of St. Patrick's down the street.

The most interesting aspect of the visibility dogma, however, is that the results that are produced don't make the altar or the pulpit more visible. In the end, these church renovations obscure the altar—by removing the raised sanctuary—and the pulpit, which is almost always removed and replaced with a low lectern.

The Humpty-Dumpty theory

During the last two years I believe we have seen an unprecedented renovation blitz. For example, there are presently at least twenty cathedrals being renovated according to the fads of the church renovators—for instance, Detroit, Milwaukee, San Antonio, St. Petersburg, Rochester, Covington, and on and on, not to mention the hundreds of parish churches now undergoing unnecessary and unwanted renovation. Perhaps this is the result of implementing the Humpty Dumpty theory. You remember Humpty:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the kings horses and all the kings men
Couldn't put Humpty back together again.*

Humpty, I believe, was an egg. But, the same might be said of our traditional churches. If they are renovated thoroughly enough, it will be impossible for the next generation to “put back together again.” Which is fortunately what these liturgical consultants see happening in certain places.

The re-renovation and restoration phase

Some of the churches that were drastically altered decades ago—during the first and second generations (or both)—are now being “re-renovated,” or restored, if you will.

One such notable project was the cathedral in Worcester, Mass. The interior restoration project there restored the cathedral's sanctuary, which had been gutted decades ago, in fact one of the first gutted cathedral sanctuaries following the Council. And not only did the iconoclasts of the 60's gut the sanctuary, they painted the interior of the whole church a battleship grey—you never paint anything battleship grey, except maybe... battleships or garbage cans.

Well, the interior was repainted, a remarkable improvement over the grey-wash. A new ornate hand-carved wood reredos and a noble cathedra were erected in place of a bare concrete wall that sat in the center of the sanctuary for three decades. The tabernacle alcove was similarly adorned and a shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe was fashioned from the leftover wood of the sanctuary project. This is impressive. The church no longer reminds us of the year 1968.

The *Baltimore Sun* recently published an article entitled “Happy Undoing of a Modernist Makeover.” The article states:

“For decades, students at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland worshipped in a beautiful Romanesque chapel that featured high vaulted ceilings, round arches and finely crafted ornamentation, including stained glass windows made in Germany. In the late 1960's, much of the architectural detail was covered up in a well-intentioned but unsympathetic modernization designed to add air conditioning and seats and provide a more contemporary space for students to celebrate Mass.

“The original sanctuary, one of the few religious spaces designed by the noted firm of Baldwin and Pennington, might have stayed hidden forever. Instead, the 1986 chapel inside Theresa Hall has been uncovered and will be restored by year's end as part of a \$1.5 million to \$2 million effort by the college to re-establish it as a focal point of spiritual life on campus.

“In recent months, contractors peeled away all the 1960's alterations, including a flat ceiling and metal ducts that obscured the vaulted spaces above, wood paneling that covered plaster walls, and carpeting that

smothered the handsome pine floor.”

Happily, I keep hearing of more and more parishes, especially under the guidance of younger pastors, who are making significant revisions to their church architecture to reflect the growing appreciation of the sacred. Tabernacles are being moved back into the sanctuary, carpet is being removed, dropped ceilings are coming down, white-washed statues are being restored to their former colors, wood-paneled walls are being taking down. Stations of the Cross are returning. The traditional furnishings of the church—candlesticks, sanctuary lamps, crucifixes, kneelers and so forth are being restored to their former use. Perhaps the most significant part of this re-restoration trend is that the parishioners in the pews love it. There is no controversy involved. In fact, along with these physical restorations, comes a true renewal of faith.

And, in contrast, it's no secret that the radical church renovations of the past decades have caused divisions in parishes, problems of all sorts. Parishioners have constantly—and rightly—complained that the revised church architecture is really an attack on their Catholic faith.

I think a true appreciation for the what the Vatican Council actually did say, what the Vatican stated in *Opera Artis* and what Pope Pius XII wrote in *Mediator Dei*—I think a true appreciation and understanding of these will lead to a return of the sacred to our Catholic churches. If we preserve our patrimony, we will protect our faith. And if we protect our patrimony, we will preserve our faith.

I would like to close by returning to Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*:

Inspired by Hugo's novel, architect Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc drew up a plan to properly restore the cathedral to its former splendor. He created stained glass windows by copying stained glass from the cathedrals in other French cities that had escaped the fashion-driven, school-trained architects and the indiscriminate destruction wrought by the Revolution.

He also replaced all the sculptures; he researched the pictorial records of other French Gothic cathedrals, and by doing so he was able to recreate the works of the medieval sculptors.

He designed a new *flèche* to top off the crossing of the cathedral as it had once been. He also restored the great doors of the cathedral and the gargoyles on the rooftop. Lastly, he had the interior scoured of the old whitewash and treated the exterior with a chemical that would preserve the stone from the industrial pollution that was already becoming a problem in the 19th century.

Thus, Viollet-le-Duc took on one of the greatest projects in the history of restoration, and was very much successful in returning the cathedral to its original beauty and charm. Perhaps then, in a decade to come, once the so-called “renewal of the renewal” effectively takes hold, our churches—those still left standing and still owned by the Church—can be restored to their original beauty—stained glass windows, statues, communion rails, tabernacles, murals, stencilwork, pews, and the various traditional furnishings—fonts, confessionals, altars, shrines, tabernacle lamps, and people—the traditional furnishings that comprise the “stuff” that makes a building a Catholic church.

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