

Who's Renovating our Traditional Churches?

By Michael S. Rose

For several decades running, Catholics have been asked to accept denuding renovations on the basis of subjective and contrived opinions that are passed off as authoritative mandates of the Church.

The following is the text of a speech delivered in Milwaukee on June 4, 2000 - on the eve of the proposed renovation of Milwaukee's Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

One of the most divisive issues in the Church in our country over the past few decades is that of church renovation. A friend of mine recently remarked to me that it is easy to see the devil's hand in this business. Why? Because it occupies us with infighting, keeps us from evangelizing, distracts us from worship, and divides our communities. What more could an fallen angel ask for? When we ought to be performing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, we are worrying if a Judas Priest might not be preparing to remove the outward manifestations of our faith from our churches. It is a pathetic situation really. It is akin to a counter-productive civil war.

The renovators preach unity, the result is discord.

The renovators preach community, the result is alienation.

The renovators preach active participation, the result is animosity and mistrust.

The renovators preach growing in our faith, the result is scandal and abandonment.

But the renovators also provide a challenge to our faith. Most Catholics who are not driven by apathy and ignorance are able to sense that something isn't quite right when a renovator crew – architect, liturgist, designer, consultant, fundraiser, pastor, archbishop – presents the standard renovation fare.

Groups of lay Catholics have been uniting in the fight against proposed changes to their churches, and the fight forces them to learn more about the Catholic faith. If they are able to get beyond the scandal, they can actually benefit spiritually and personally.

This reminds me a bit of the Dr. Seuss story about the Grinch Who Stole Christmas. The old crotchety Grinch who lived high on the hill above the city of the Whos detested the fact that people were happy. So when the biggest feast of the year –Christmas—came along. (Perhaps they were not an “Easter people”) the Grinch decided to take away all the material manifestations of the great day—the ornaments, the gifts, the food, everything associated with the great feast. And when the big day dawned and the Whos discovered that their material goods were gone, they kept the faith—so to speak—they celebrated Christmas with the same spirit as always, despite the fact that the Grinch had sabotaged their holy day.

The renovators have a whole lot in common with the Grinch and his mean spirit, but unfortunately the renovators have accomplished what the Grinch failed to do. We have largely been brutalized by the renovator's agenda which has swept through the entire country sparing little, removing the outward signs of our faith in an effort to break the Catholic people of their faith, their piety, their love and their unity. Why the success?

One answer to this question is this: the renovators know that they can count on two large groups of Catholics.

The first are the apathetic, the people who really don't care, at least not before the renovation is realized. These people are more concerned with who's going to win the final four or if they're going to be able to buy that new car next year.

The second group is the ignorant, the people who are comfortable just going along to get along. They may want to “do the right thing” but lack the skill, courage and knowledge to speak up, to challenge, to demand accountability and so forth.

The renovators understand these two groups of people. They are in many ways docile and malleable; they

are natural cooperators. It is good to bear this in mind when trying to understand how so many campaigns to liturgically remake a church are successful.

I'll speak more to the role these two groups play a bit later on. I'll do well to focus first on the renovators.

Proponents of the post-conciliar church renovations would first have us believe the Second Vatican Council called for a new paradigm in the design of Catholic churches, one that justifies radical remodeling of existing structures. Although renovation enthusiasts are fond of invoking the Council, when challenged they cannot cite one relevant passage from the Council's documents to support their claims.

The direction these renovations generally take is not one based on Church teaching. Rather, Catholics are being asked to accept the new church designs on the basis of subjective and contrived opinions that are passed off as authoritative mandates of the Church.

As I've said, the man in the pew instinctively resists the design proposals. But church renovators have learned a thing or two in the first two to three decades of their profession's experience with America's Catholic parishes. Today's renovators, those who comprise the archi-liturgical establishment, form an elite few whose modus operandi is to effectively "deprogram" and "re-educate" parishioners in their new paradigm through a carefully devised process, one that is less than honest, one that understands well that a majority of most Catholics in any given parish—save for a few—will be of the ignorant or apathetic.

Since I first began reporting on church renovation projects I have heard from Catholics all over the country. Almost all describe the same dishonest process and the same architectural results.

In short, we are experiencing a crisis of fashion: If we were to review the past 35 years of church renovation projects we would quickly come to understand that the specific design work of the church renovator is not mandated by the Church (as he will invariably claim), but driven by fads that are subject to the ever-changing archi-liturgical fashion. The renovation designs undertaken in the 1970's, for instance, are so dated that they are an embarrassment to church renovators of the 1990's.

The contemporary archi-liturgical establishment

Today, to appease liturgical fashion, another caste of "school-trained architects," licensed, privileged and patented by a local bishop, move from one house of worship to the next, requiring the disfigurement of priceless works of sacred art, in the end mangling the entire edifice of the church

Today's school-trained architect, however, is usually no architect. Rather, he appears in the character of a new church professional known as the "liturgical design consultant."

According to Franciscan Sister Sandra Schweitzer of Indianapolis, in 1999 there were only 103 "certified" liturgical design consultants in the United States. Design consultants are certified by an accrediting body by the name of the Association of Consultants for Liturgical Space (ACLS). Sister Schweitzer, an entrepreneur design consultant herself, is among the elite 103. Most of those certified in the field of liturgical design are trained in a three-year program at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. These certified design consultants along with certain liturgists, who are much more numerous, comprise the archi-liturgical establishment in the Church.

While appearing to give architectural advice, the design consultant's real function is to manipulate parishioners into accepting controversial changes to their church building and into believing that their own input — their ideas of what a parish church building should be — is being taken into consideration in the renovation of their church. To this end, diocesan liturgical committees recommend these facilitators to engineer the whole process that a parish must undergo to achieve a preordained design with little or no resistance from parishioners.

The practical recommendations of today's renovators as well as those of decades past are clearly based on the archi-liturgical theories of the 1960's. Protestant architect Edward A. Sövik was one of the leading theorists and practitioners of that time. His book, *Architecture in Worship*, published in 1973, continues to be warmly recommended to parishes by today's Catholic church renovators. What is significant about his book—released five years before EACW—is that it articulates the ideology behind his practical recommendations. He forthrightly discloses his motivation and his desired results: to continue where the reformation Protestants left off four hundred years ago.

"The incompleteness of the Reformation in terms of architecture was no doubt the result of the longevity of

architecture," explains Sövik. He laments the fact that these medieval edifices are not easily removed or changed. Even after the iconoclasm of the Reformation, writes Sövik, "The 'houses of God' from medieval times continued to stand, continued 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.'" He 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."

To move beyond this 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.

Sövik says he wants a "throw-away" interior for his centrum. "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." How then should one properly design the throw-away interior of a centrum which will not be mistaken by anyone to be a "holy place" or a "house of God"? Sövik proposes the following:

- Remove the pews and replace them with portable chairs;
- Set up a separate room to reserve the eucharistic species (if necessary at all);
- Remove any artwork which might be construed as strictly religious in content, e.g., religious statues or icons;
- Eliminate the traditional sanctuary by bringing the "table" into the congregation and arranging the chairs around the table;
- 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 early 1970's; it is the same practical advice which is offered in the BCL's *Environment & Art in Catholic Worship*. He did not in fact intend his book only for his Protestant co-religionists, but marketed it as a handbook for both Catholic and Protestant congregations: "[E]specially useful for church leaders, clergy, and building committees of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, it offers practical, economical advice on both the remodeling of existing structures and the construction of new ones."

Catholic church renovators have obviously been inspired or affected by Protestant architect Edward Sövik for the past three decades at least. He has enjoyed guru status among the archi-liturgical establishment, his architectural work is held up as exemplary, and he is regarded by many church renovators as a mentor. Indeed, his archi-liturgical ideology of secularizing the sacred was en vogue among liturgists during the mid-1970's as it is today. Sövik and kindred spirits were caught up with 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.

The process

I don't have enough time this afternoon to go into the process of manipulation that is so often used in parish after parish, diocese after diocese, to accomplish any given renovation project. Suffice it to say, understanding what is termed the Delphi Technique (as I outline in my book), is essential to understanding how parishes are manipulated—more or less—into accepting radical changes to their church building.

Fr. Richard Vosko

A few words on liturgical consultant Dick Vosko are certainly in order. His work is well known among a segment of the Catholic population. Some look to him as a mentor; others see him as a dedicated iconoclast who makes a hell of a lot of money each year assisting bishops and priest to deconstruct their churches.

While appearing to give architectural advice, Fr. Vosko's primary modus operandi is to manipulate parishioners into believing that their own input — their 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 LDCs such as Fr. Vosko to engineer the whole process that a parish must undergo to achieve a preordained design with little or no resistance from pew-sitters.

The paradigm shift

Fr. 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 non-authoritative document Environment & Art in Catholic Worship; and manipulating parishioners to make them feel as if the ideas he puts forth are their own.

"The implications of a Vatican II liturgy," Fr. Vosko wrote in his book *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 a Vatican I church building."

In a 1994 article published in *The Catholic World*, Fr. Vosko wrote further that "the churches of Pius XII (part of a long inherited tradition)" were familiar places where Catholics could go either to pray alone or "be with others during masses, novenas and devotions." Both public and private devotions were important and respected, he admits.

However, he added, "the post-Vatican II church building is different. What Catholics do is different." Fr. Vosko even goes so far as to say that "the whole definition of a church building has radically changed because we are radically changing."

Yet the main thesis motivating this LDC's life-work is that the built environment can have immense impact on "adult behavior patterns." Thus it must be considered that Catholics are radically changing because (among other things) the church building, even the definition of the church building, has been radically changed—not by the Church, but by the archi-liturgical establishment.

Herein lies the necessity and objective of effecting a "paradigm shift" in Catholic church architecture. The LDC functions as the change agent (facilitator) following the Delphi Technique to radically remake Catholicism by striking at the outward manifestations of the Catholic faith.

To explicitly render this paradigm shift, Fr. Vosko speaks disparagingly of the old paradigm of nearly 1500 years as one of "familiarity" and "mystery," a holy building set in a place that gave the community a sense of continuity and security:

The architectural style and furnishings in the [American] neighborhood churches were similar in many ways to those in European homelands. The quiet ambience, the ubiquitous smell of incense, the flicker of candles dancing in the darkness, the almost eerie presence of innumerable images, laser-like beams streaming through stained glass windows, immense high altars, and the surreptitious presentation of the Mass contributed to the familiar and mysterious milieu. My boyhood church was the church of immigrants clinging to the past for continuity and identity. It sustained what people believed to be expressions of mystery. It was where God dwelled.

In contrast to the old paradigm, Fr. Vosko outlines his "church of tomorrow" as one that is primarily secular and profane: "similar to the other familiar public spaces," he writes, "buildings that are well designed and constructed to accommodate large numbers of people in comfortable and pleasant ways."

The new paradigm will be characterized not only by comfort, he says, but it will be larger, "accommodating between 5,000 and more at a single liturgy." The megachurch, believes Fr. Vosko, will provide fewer liturgies for a growing population with a declining priesthood. "Communities will not necessarily cohere around these megachurch centers," he adds.

To summarize Fr. Vosko's "worship center" (née "church") of tomorrow, he writes hopefully that it:

- will tell the "faith stories" of this age;
- will be mysterious not because of any architectural or artistic sleight of hand but because of the respectful and gracious way people conduct themselves;
- will become, once again, a house for the church (rather than a "house of God");
- will use "sophisticated building materials and technologies," not the natural and more expensive materials used in the churches of the past;

- will be “ecologically sound” and “completely energy efficient”;
- will reflect and symbolize “the gospel message of care and respect for people and the environment”;
- will focus on the assembly “gathered about the font and table”;
- will stimulate the senses through the incorporation of mobile art, holography, and computerized projections;
- will incorporate natural scents to “trigger the full sensual capacity of the community causing interactive, conscious and subliminal participation in the celebration of word and sacrament”;
- will more fully integrate music, singing, drama and body movement into the worship action;
- will include “other sectors” devoted to bible study, prayer sessions, counseling and support groups;
- will have a database of biographies so that the community may be able “to interact with holographic images of religious folk heroes”;
- will feature sculptures, weavings and paintings of “saintly personalities” in its “inner and outer gardens and pathways”;
- will house the “eucharistic bread” in “its own chapel sector.”

Judging from numerous campaigns that Fr. Vosko has waged over the years, it would seem that he seeks to realize the idiosyncratic goals of the new archi-liturgical paradigm, which are based on fashion, not on Church teaching or tradition, nor on a translation of authentic Catholic theology into built form, through the “worship center,” which he hopes will replace the “outmoded” (in his own words) and intractable church building, i.e., the old paradigm.

Inter-faith designer

Sr. Schweitzer alleges that only 103 LDCs have been “certified” by the archi-liturgical establishment in this country. If so, it is a small group indeed. Judging from the similarities in the techniques used by most LDCs, one can only conclude that there is but one simple font for the promotion of the archi-liturgical agenda. Father Vosko’s modus operandi is the same as the LDC operatives in Michigan, in Colorado, in L.A.—virtually anywhere in the U.S. and Canada.

Yet one thing other liturgical design consultants may not have in common with Fr. Richard Vosko is that this LDC’s archi-liturgical portfolio is not limited to designing for Catholic congregations or even Christian congregations. Fr. Vosko is propagating his archi-liturgical theories among Jews as well.

A project called “Synagogue 2000,” sponsored by a Jewish group, features a liturgical design course authored by Fr. Vosko. Available online at the Synagogue 2000 website (<http://www.syn2000.com>), the “course” is characterized by the same design recommendations as applied to his modern Catholic church building. In other words, regardless of what faith, what tradition, what liturgy, Fr. Vosko’s design recommendations, founded on 1960’s archi-liturgical theories, can be applied to one and all.

He poses four questions to the Jews about their synagogues:

1. Is your synagogue dark and dreary? Is this the kind of atmosphere that can help or hinder your worship experience?
2. Is there enough space inside your synagogue that invites your members to meet and greet one another in a spirit of hospitality? Or does your lobby say Hurry Up and Go Home?
3. Does the approach to your synagogue convey a sense of welcome? Or does it say we’ve made it rather difficult to get here?
4. Does the seating arrangement in your synagogue encourage or discourage participation during worship?

One common statement among Catholic LDCs in defense of the “in-the-round” seating arrangement is that it fosters a “Christo-centric” liturgy, or that it facilitates “gathering around word and table.” Yet Fr. Vosko recommends the same “sociopetal” seating arrangement (i.e., “in-the-round”) for the synagogue—not

because it is “Christ-centered,” or that the Jews will be “gathering around word and table” in this application, but because, in Fr. Vosko’s opinion, this arrangement fosters “a high level of participation in the congregation during worship.” In the traditional synagogue arrangement, he claims, the congregation is “more likely to watch and listen to the service conducted on the bema.” He recommends his usual renovations without once invoking the authority of the Second Vatican Council or “Environment and Art in Catholic Worship.”

Thus, these archi-liturgical theories are based not on a faith or liturgical tradition but on sociological research and the whims of fashion.

Archbishop Weakland

I would like to say a few favorable words about Archbishop Rembert Weakland. I admire how forthright he seems to have been about this project for more than a year now. He has not claimed, as many other bishops and priests have, that the Archdiocese is undertaking a “restoration” or “refurbishing” project. The columns I have read from the diocesan paper have clearly indicated that he wishes to remake the entire cathedral in his own image. In a sense, that is commendable.

I fully expect, in accord with his style of leadership, that he will assess all parishes each year in order to foot the bills of this renovation. Whether that is legal to do according Church laws might be a project for someone more familiar with canon law than myself.

I also expect that he will reveal fully his plans to renovate the Cathedral and when people object, he will say tough luck... I am the archbishop, and further I am a Benedictine, and what I say goes.

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