

## The Renovation of the Milwaukee Cathedral

By Fr. William Turner

The cathedral's new liturgical design seems to repeat what so many ill-conceived renovations have done in the recent past.

The renovation of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, received national and even international attention in 2001-2002. Publicity culminated in an uncharacteristic intervention from Rome by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Usually reticent to interfere in the local Church, Rome made an exception in this case, causing many American Catholics and hierarchy to question the reason for such action. What was Rome's authority in such local policies as placement of organs, tabernacles, church architecture, and could they veto or delay the local bishop's decisions on these matters? The archbishop felt the dissension came from only a small number of detractors, who had gained the ear of the Roman authorities. He was required to submit his position to officials in Rome, who had asked that he delay continuance of a renovation that was virtually past the point of no return. He did not submit to that request, the renovation was completed, and the dedication of the renovated cathedral took place in February of 2002.

The Archbishop submitted his resignation that year at age 75, as is required by canon law, and his resignation was accepted in June.

Milwaukee's cathedral sits in the downtown region of clean buildings, streets, and remarkably well-tended gardens, a few short blocks from Lake Michigan. The cathedral was built on the location of the first Catholic Church in Wisconsin, and has been named a Milwaukee landmark in recognition of its architectural and historical significance. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The cathedral's magnificent tower is appointed with decoration that draws the eye upward from the building facade. It is recognizable as a copy of the old Capuchin Franciscan Church steeple that was destroyed in Dresden, Germany, during World War II. The roof over the long nave stretches across the city block that contains the church and its accompanying buildings. Particularly striking—and a critical part of the recent renovation and restoration—is the refashioning of the old school into parish offices and the creation of an atrium and a garden. The atrium itself is attached to the wall of the cathedral by a glass enclosure that provides a space for gathering before and after the services. It stands in the spot where the former high school once stood. This atrium is meant to express a connection between the sacred and the secular, encouraging parishioners to participate in the outreach ministries that take place nearby in the connecting buildings. The cloister and garden on this north side of the cathedral compliment the surrounding neighborhood of the downtown business center.

The cathedral boasts nearly 1,000 households. Few of this number have children. The parish commitment to the poor and the homeless and many social concerns are reflected in the programs, the use of space, and critically, the cathedral itself. Not many would disagree that this vision to live out the gospel to the poor was encouraged and actively promoted by the former Archbishop. His response to the call of the social gospel has brought forth critics before. In the case of the renovation of his cathedral, and his vision of its purpose at the service of God's people, he called for cathedral worshippers to live the gospel message outside its walls. The renovation was clearly a statement promoting the social gospel, but may not as successfully express concerns for the Catholic identity of its worshippers, particularly with respect to the architecture and the accoutrements of the cathedral.

Romanesque features are powerfully represented in the cathedral's architecture. Upon entering the church from the west doors—which are no longer the preferred entrance—the eye is directed front and center. An organ has been positioned where once stood a large baldachino, tabernacle, and high altar. Visually, this could make one standing at the front doors wonder: Could this be a concert hall? The renovators had that in mind and knew that the parish would welcome local musicians and concerts as part of the cathedral's outreach. Nonetheless, they hoped that the altar and the suspended corona and crucifix would be the centerpiece of the cathedral. The effect of the corona is so striking and perhaps so out of place in the Romanesque surroundings that a pilgrim could fear proximity to the sharp base of the cross that threatens to pierce the altar. This "focus of the action of Christ" has been moved to the center of the nave. However, the small size, and the enormous organ which has been positioned closer to where the altar once stood, may have diminished the hope of making this altar the focal point of the cathedral.

The placement of the organ was chosen for acoustical reasons. To place the organ in the apse was never previously an option. Today, as the entrance of liturgical preference seems to be from the atrium on the north side, one is neither immediately engaged by the massive nave nor the permanency of stationary pews which would have directed vision from west to east. Movable chairs have increased the cathedral seating capacity from 748 to 980. The full number of chairs is not placed in the nave except when there is a need. While this is practical and flexible, like many of the recommendations coming from certain liturgical consultants, it denies the importance of permanency. The concept of permanence so eagerly encourages the hearts of many Catholics. Movable seating may be likened to repeatedly changing the furniture in a favorite room. One may attempt to sit down and only too late realize that a favorite chair has been removed. Voices coming from the chairs may be different than the voices that were said to have come from the pews! One may sit in his own chair, but a pew must be shared with others. Whatever accoutrements may be chosen, the concern over permanence in opposition to transitory furnishings needs to be addressed seriously and in relation to Catholic identity.

The renovation has included a baptism pool, found close to the front doors. Baptism, the entrance into the Church, is expressed in this pool and font of running water, "leading the baptized to the altar and beyond." Unfortunately, in this case what visually lies "beyond" is actually the organ. Nevertheless, one should praise the understanding of theology found here and the nobility of the materials that were used. Indeed, I was truly impressed in the choice of good workmanship that created an outstanding overall effect. These sacred things lift the hearts and minds of worshippers to God, the source of their strength, and edify their future actions. This vision is expressed in the cathedral's Mission Statement: "We are committed to worship our God, preach the gospel, and serve our neighbor."

I was also struck by the attention given to the restoration of the columns and capitals. The use of gold and red and the concern to return to the original colors both enhance the Romanesque architectural appointments. The sense of verticality is uplifting and the lighting is highly effective. The colorful painted medallions of former bishops high on side walls tell a visual story. These decorations not only enrich the sense of history, but also call to mind similar decorations that may be found in some churches of Rome.

The ambo has been positioned immediately in front of the organ. The preacher must walk a minimum of five steps as he enters and stands behind it. It calls to mind a sort of stage or walkway. One might ask if this placement is not reminiscent of one traditional Protestant design, where the pulpit is primary and focuses the congregation on the preaching done there assisted by an organ and hymns of praise. The organ is scheduled to be ready for use in 2005. One wonders whether it will overpower the pulpit that has been placed so close by.

The cathedral's new liturgical design seems to repeat what so many renovations have done in the recent past. There is a subtle attempt to turn the long nave floor plan sideways, with parts of the liturgy occurring here and there. This direction could disintegrate liturgy into acts of showmanship and entertainment without a permanence of focus that sacred action requires. While it is difficult—sight unseen—to comment credibly about the effectiveness of liturgy here and the effect of the surroundings upon it, my concern is focused not on the liturgy but what is left to celebrate once the liturgy is over. The House of God must stand on its own, a visible comment for all to see; one that not only uses the noblest of materials, but exhibits them so that others may be encouraged by these gifts from God.

All too often, the recent liturgical movement, and the architectural design it inspires, has focused solely on the liturgical action as the purpose of the building. If this is true, the cost to build such a church and the cost of its renovation may be too much to bear for the sake of a few hours a week (Mt. 26:9).

Where is to be found the living presence of God? What does Catholic theology say about it? How is it to be expressed in the building and its architecture? Catholics today who were alive before Vatican II would point to the tabernacle, and say that such a living presence is to be found there. Those who have been trained in theology in the last 30 years would also point to other Christians and the person of the minister.

Many cathedrals have always had a separate chapel for Eucharistic reservation. This cathedral has not. The placement of the tabernacle in a side chapel continues to upset many Catholics. If it were to be replaced with an organ they would be infuriated. The suggestion that separate chapels be created for the Eucharist has been rejected by many Catholics and bishops alike.

There is now evidence of a stronger Eucharistic devotion in the many perpetual adoration chapels constructed across the United States and elsewhere. Many churches have moved the tabernacle back to a

central position. Architectural design could be in a state of suspended animation for many years awaiting the outcome of the debate on tabernacle placement.

The Milwaukee cathedral has used the former baptistry as a beautiful setting for Eucharistic reservation. The bronze tabernacle from 1943 sits on plinth fashioned from three columns originally part of the sanctuary baldachino. This sacred space is well appointed and a fitting place for private prayer.

Renovators often use materials from the old in constructing the new. The attempt to incorporate the past in this way, while using the valued materials, does not always achieve the effect of convincing Catholics that tradition has been respected. It can be more expensive to renovate using older materials and the sacred object has been totally changed in the renovation. The sense of what is sacred to many Catholics has been uprooted, and their rituals and symbols have been changed, only to be offered back to them in a new form for veneration today. Experience teaches us that they are not accepting the gesture positively.

Cathedrals take their names from the Cathedra, or bishop's chair found there. Such a chair visibly represents the bishop's teaching authority in the local church. It is an important symbol that should not be minimal. Again, the renovators have used noble materials to create a fitting cathedra from the old marble communion rail. The placement of that chair against the pillars, in juxtaposition to the presider's chair could be argued as minimal. The chair is raised up on a three-step-high platform. A tapestry with the archiepiscopal Coat of Arms is being created and may have the effect of bringing more fitting prominence to this necessary symbol.

Iconography is one more critical aspect found in the Catholic identity. The shrines and devotional art of St. John the Evangelist Cathedral are evident but nominal at this time. The long range plan is to include more commissioned works of art in the devotional niches along the north and south side walls. Currently, statuary includes a major shrine to "Mary, Mother of the Church." The bronze and gilt figure is found front and north in a place of prominence. It is viewed at eye level, and although on a small pedestal, the placement may be in conflict with the hope that the saints are to be lifted up as models. A statue of Blessed Pope John XXIII is found on the opposite side of the cathedral. It was placed there to honor the saintly pontiff who inaugurated the reforms of Vatican II. Striking in design, the Pope stands alone, dwarfed by the massive surroundings, not unlike Blessed John himself at the time of the Council.

Other appointments—such as the illuminated 14 Stations of the Cross (replicas of those found in St. Ann Church in Munich), the stained glass windows portraying the 12 Apostles and St. Paul, Venetian mosaic inlays, a white oak statue of Moses, the two chapels of Reconciliation, the day chapel, and an ambry for the reservation of the Holy Oils—all contribute to the beauty of this church. Noble materials have been used in all these examples.

In the light of such a conscientious attention to detail, the use of good quality materials, and the willingness of so many Catholics and benefactors to contribute to the project, one could be led to agree that opposition was insignificant in the face of such a show of support—although it is my belief that an appeal to numbers is counter-productive. Nonetheless, the work is done, there can be no turning back, and a new archbishop has been installed. All that remains now is what can be learned from this renovation to assist us elsewhere. I therefore offer a more positive critique of the experience and the renovation of this church. It may be difficult to move beyond the personalities and vision involved that resulted in the Milwaukee protest, but this must be done for the sake of the Church, not only here but anywhere similar renovations occur.

As a Catholic as well as an anthropologist, I am deeply touched by the customs and history of people. I grieve when those customs and history are either disrespected or seem to be ignored. Church renovations must lead us beyond the subjective, beyond the promotion of reform, to a place where we are more open to see the gifts of God celebrated in the existing customs and history of the local people.

I continue to propose that using the wisdom found in the methodology of cultural anthropology is a successful approach to the problems inherent in both architectural and liturgical renewal and design implementation. Many in the liturgical community continue to resist such a process and promote their vision of renewal at all costs. This sentiment is tragically displayed in the plaque found in the west entranceway that marks the renovation. It tells the visitor that this cathedral was "restored, not without some difficulty, exactly to the norms of Vatican II." It remains forever a reminder that this difficulty was unable to be resolved here, and what was more important than such resolution was the vision of the renovators of how "exactly" the norms of Vatican II must be carried out.

I refuse to believe that this is the last word in Milwaukee or elsewhere. But rather than memorialize

unresolved difficulties, let us celebrate the good things that have been done here. And in the future, let us work to offer the world living buildings that express our identity with beauty, raising that identity up, offering it to the world.

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