

Renovating or Ruining the Cathedrals?

By Michael S. Rose

US cathedrals are fast becoming popular targets for "renovations" that strip them of their original charm and making them objects of liturgical fads.

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Milwaukee; Detroit; San Antonio; New Orleans; Memphis; Charleston; Kansas City, Kansas; Grand Rapids; Covington, Kentucky; St. Petersburg; Colorado Springs; Lafayette, Indiana; Honolulu—these are just some of the US dioceses now renovating their cathedral churches. Others like Houston, Oakland, Laredo, and most notably, Los Angeles are in the process of building new cathedrals. We are in the midst of a renovation blitz.

Father Carl Last, former head of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and director of the planned renovation for St. John the Evangelist Cathedral in Milwaukee, told cathedral parishioners in June that twenty cathedrals in the US are presently being renovated. Milwaukee's project appears to be the most drastic of the cathedral renovation projects now underway, although perhaps not as controversial as others, such as San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio and Covington, Kentucky's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption.

According to conceptual plans released by Father Last in June, the Milwaukee cathedral, which dates from 1847, will be remodeled to square with what he calls "the latest liturgical norms." The \$10 million renovation plans include: removing the fixed wooden pews and replacing them with chairs that can be reconfigured at the whim of liturgists; relocating the choir loft to the front of the church; placing a baptismal pool near the front entrance of the cathedral; moving the tabernacle away from the centrally located baldachino; expanding the current choir loft to accommodate balcony seating; converting the sacristy into a daily Mass chapel; and creating niches to display "ethnic art representing the diversity of the archdiocesan population."

Plans to move the altar into "the midst of the congregation" are drawing the heaviest criticism. According to Milwaukee's Catholic Herald, "The chairs would be arranged in community-building fashion," in accord with the current "norms" advanced by a small elite corps of liturgical ideologues bent on remaking the Mass and redefining the posture of worship for Catholics in the US. Since no architectural drawings have yet been rendered, Father Last claims that no budget has yet been established for the project, which was expected to commence in August. A diocesan-wide resistance to the proposed renovations is being led by the St. Gregory VII chapter of Catholics United for the Faith, which has already organized a petition campaign.

One of the more contentious aspects of the Milwaukee project is the hiring of liturgical consultant Father Richard Vosko, a priest of the Diocese of Albany who has been on "special assignment" since 1970 renovating (many say "ruining") Catholic churches throughout the country. Father Vosko's iconoclasm is matched only by his ubiquity. At present he is also "consulting" on the designs for cathedrals in San Antonio and St. Petersburg, providing the education sessions at Colorado's Spring's St. Mary's Cathedral, and serving as consultant for Cardinal Roger Mahony's controversial new cathedral in Los Angeles. He recently completed work on Grand Rapid's Cathedral of St. Andrew; and is rumored to be in line for a commission at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, New York. In recent years he has also served as liturgical consultant for the renovations of cathedrals in Nashville and Seattle, as well as dozens of parish churches.

In San Antonio Father Vosko is promoting a similar renovation program for the nation's oldest cathedral, calling for rearranged seating around an altar that sits in "the midst of the congregation." Standard fad features such as moveable seating and a baptismal pool near the entrance of the church are also part of the program. Last year the archdiocese announced a \$5.7 million fundraising affair to "restore" the 262-year-old church. Warnings from laymen about the possibility of radical alterations have been met with considerable irritation by cathedral rector Father David Garcia, who publicly charged his critics in the city's Express News of "a campaign of distortion and misinformation." In a classic posture of denial routinely assumed by those overseeing church renovations, Father Garcia has maintained that the historic architecture of San Fernando Cathedral will be preserved and restored. "We're rearranging furniture, not modernizing the Church," he told the *Express News*.

Edmundo Vargas, a leader of the renovation resistance in San Antonio, wonders why a consultant with

Father Vosko's reputation would be hired if plans were simply to "preserve and restore." Vargas' organization, Defenders of the Magisterium, maintains a web site (<http://www.dotm.org>) to keep fellow Catholics educated about issues regarding the renovation. Contrary to Father Garcia's claims, the architect's renderings revealed in February showed no kneelers, no statues, and no pulpit. Judging from the steady stream of letters to the *San Antonio Express-News*, many in the community strongly object to proposals to alter the interior of the church. Hispanic Catholics are especially concerned that the cathedral's Spanish heritage will be lost. Defenders of the Magisterium has organized a petition drive objecting not only to the renovation but also to the diocese's use of the historic cathedral for non-religious events such as flamenco dance performances.

In response to critics, archdiocesan officials continue to maintain with a straight face that the cathedral is not being "renovated," but will be simply a "return to its former beauty and style." This same claim has been made about every historic church renovation in which Father Vosko has been involved. The process he engineers includes invariable appeals to the historical and artistic heritage of the church in question. In Seattle, for instance, the pastor of St. James Cathedral assured all that the "beauty and integrity of the old venerable structure" would be respected. Literature for the 1994 renovation also stated that the project would not "destroy the architectural beauty of the church." Yet that's exactly what happened. Catherine Ross of Bellevue, Washington, explained, "They said they were going to reclaim the historical integrity of the church, but they wrecked the design scheme. We don't have an Italian Renaissance church anymore. Our cathedral looks like a Reformation-era Catholic church taken over by Protestants who didn't want any 'popish artifacts.'"

Similarly, last November Father Vosko told Milwaukee's *Catholic Herald*: "No one in their right mind intends to do harm to the cathedral, any more than we'd intend on destroying our own home. Whatever renovation is decided upon must enhance the cathedral without taking away its innate architectural and artistic beauty."

But this script is not confined to Father Vosko; most other "certified" liturgical consultants use similar techniques and rhetoric with respect to historic church structures. In Covington, Kentucky, for instance, Bishop Robert Muench and architect Bill Brown continue to claim that their proposed renovation of the Cathedral Basilica will be "consonant with the cathedral's basic architectural design and history," despite the fact that the entire sanctuary is being moved out into the "midst of the congregation," the marble communion rail and ornate hand-carved woodwork is being removed, a baptismal pool is being installed, and pews are being rearranged or removed.

Detroit's cathedral is being renovated by Latvian native Gunnar Birkerts, a Michigan architect of international acclaim. Plans at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral call for a \$20 million expansion and overhaul. The expansion includes a glass-and-steel transept that will be added to the north side of the neo-Gothic church. "We want to transform this formidable, dark, gray building into something that is much more inviting to people," Birkerts told the *Detroit Free Press*. "The shadowy stone arches around the altar will be transformed by curving metal-mesh sheets that will form a multi-layer abstract backdrop for the Mass." Judging the project by such descriptions, many Detroit-area Catholics are concerned that the cathedral will be transformed into another one of the pieces of flat modern art that dot the city's forlorn urban landscape.

Why the mad rush?

Curiously, cathedral rectors seem to be discovering en masse that their bishops' churches are in need of some urgent repair--a leaky roof, an eroding foundation, an outdated mechanical system, and so forth. In each case these "urgent" practical repairs have led to a full-scale liturgical remodeling.

Monsignor Anthony Tocco, the head of the cathedral renovation committee in Detroit, explained to the Free Press that Blessed Sacrament's "roof was in awful condition to the point that fixtures were harmed and the walls discolored. The bathrooms are inadequate, the lighting is poor, and we have no good gathering areas." This, he said, precipitated the current \$20 million project that the diocese claims it will cover.

Similarly, Father Last told the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* that "church officials began looking at renovating [St. John Cathedral] only when infrastructure concerns began to crop up." This urgent need to make practical improvements often gives rise to a radical restructuring of the church's liturgical/architectural components, although no linkage logically exists.

Informed Catholic activists, now better acquainted with renovation tactics than in years past, are better able to recognize the warning signs of plans to implement a major church overhaul. Activists in Rochester, New York, for instance, have seen the writing on the wall for the future of that diocese's Sacred Heart Cathedral. They are acting now to "nip it in the bud" before any of the architectural plans get underway.

The church renovation business appears to have mushroomed over the past year or so, not so much because the need of repairs has suddenly become urgent, as because the renovation environment may change drastically soon. Two important Church documents that may affect church architecture significantly are due out soon. The US bishops are in the midst of preparing a statement on church architecture, to be discussed and possibly voted on at that bishops' national meeting in November of 2000. Likewise, the Vatican recently released the third edition of the General Instruction to the Roman Missal. Both documents are likely to contradict some renovation design features highly favored by the liturgical renovation crowd.

In fact, last October, church architects, design consultants, and quasi-artists gathered in Colorado Springs to discuss ways of getting around the expected directives that may soon be forthcoming. In the meantime, liturgical design consultants are recommending the "Humpty Dumpty" approach: renovate as much as possible at as many churches as possible before the new documents are released. Once millions have been spent to destroy a cathedral, for instance, it will be hard "to put back together again."

New document on church architecture

In November, the US bishops will be discussing a controversial document on church architecture. Commissioned more than five years ago, the document, originally entitled *Domus Dei* but now known as "Built of Living Stones," was first presented for discussion at the bishops' open meeting in Washington last fall. Its stated purpose is to set forth practical principles in the design and renovation of Catholic churches.

Many of the American churches built or renovated in the past two decades have been guided by principles set forth in "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship" (EACW), the 1978 booklet that has come increasingly under fire for its lack of authoritative directives and its architectural reductionism. Critics of the former document, which is known as the "Renovator's Bible," say it has produced uninspiring and banal Catholic church architecture. Few in the pews disagree with this assessment. With this in mind, the new instruction is meant to supplant EACW once it is approved by the US bishops' conference. The final form of "Built of Living Stones" could significantly influence the design of Catholic churches in the new century.

Unfortunately, the first draft of the document posed little threat to the status quo. Aside from its deficiencies regarding the various design considerations that bear on church architecture, the key issue from the perspective of ordinary Catholics in the pews is that these directives have an impact not because of what they say, but because of what they allow and what they can be used to justify. In a sense, the norms themselves are less important than the interpretation which will be placed on them.

If "Domus Dei" had been approved last year by the bishops, the "liturgical design consultants" who dominate the field of church design and renovation would have been able to use it to justify most, if not all, of the subjective and contrived ideas they have been long promoting. To justify status quo fads such as bubbling baptismal pools, displaced tabernacles, and a paucity of sacred works of art, the proposed instruction made a contrived appeal to their "symbolic value." This method of appealing to strained symbolism is known in the world of architecture as "post-rationalization." The designer approaches the project with a preset idea of what he wants to accomplish and how he will do so. Once the project is designed, he contrives the reasons or justifications for his design decisions, oftentimes relying on highly dubious symbolic references or other rationalizations not of a practical nature. In the profession of law, this is known as "The Yale Thesis." As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. explained it some years ago: "The Yale thesis, crudely put, is that any judge chooses his results and reasons backward." *Domus Dei* started with a conscious acceptance of the various liturgical/architectural trends of the day, and reasoned backward in an effort to support these conclusions.

That is not to say the first draft of this new document on church architecture isn't an improvement over EACW. It would be hard to argue otherwise; but even with most points on which *Domus Dei* is a clear improvement over EACW, the proposed norms allow loopholes that will only serve to empower the liturgical design consultant to continue with his planned program of architectural changes to the liturgical elements of the church. That is the bottom line, and, judging from the discussion at the bishops' conference last year, they too may realize this. With this awareness it is hoped that the newest draft of "Built of Living Stones" may be evaluated from the practical perspective of what the proposed instruction will allow and what it will justify. If, as it has been often stated, the new document is to serve Catholics by providing a solution to the problem of banal church architecture and divisive renovation jobs, the new document will not be a success if it simply ratifies the status quo.

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