

Tridentine Community News

April 9, 2006

Church Restoration and Preservation

Last week we made note of the growing movement towards traditional church design. This week we will examine different approaches to maintenance of historic church buildings.

Some of you may be familiar with the term “wreckovation,” referring to the unfortunate trend of churches to remove altars, communion rails, kneelers, statues, and sacred art in the name of liturgical modernization. A book has been written about such operations, Michael Rose’s “The Renovation Manipulation.”

Perhaps the most infamous wreckovation project of late occurred at Milwaukee’s Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. Despite a Vatican intervention that tried to halt the work, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee proceeded to reconfigure the church by putting chairs in place of pews, surrounding a small, centrally located altar that replaced a traditional high altar in the apse. The walls are devoid of paintings. It is hard to imagine how such a bland space could inspire the soul.

Locally, Dearborn’s Sacred Heart Church and Birmingham’s Holy Name (among others) have suffered from similarly puzzling reordering of their worship spaces. Occasionally, parishioners are able to stop, or at least temporarily halt, such projects, as has occurred at St. Charles Borromeo Church in North Hollywood, California.

Fortunately, there is good news to go along with the bad: A group of artisans have emerged who specialize in bringing beauty back to churches that had either previously suffered wreckovation, or which had never been ornately adorned in the first place.

One such organization is Murals By Jericho. They offer a variety of services ranging from painting, to statuary creation, to construction of church fixtures. At Peoria’s St. Mark Church, they took a plain interior:



And rendered it into a glorious example of Gothic splendor. Note the addition of a true high altar:



More impressive examples of their work can be found at www.muralsbyjericho.com.

In Kansas City, Missouri, Bishop Robert Finn recently turned over Old St. Patrick Church to the local Tridentine Community, with the understanding that they would fund a proper restoration of the church. Similar efforts are either underway or recently completed at several Tridentine Mass sites administered by the Institute of Christ the King, including Chicago’s St. Gelasius Church.

While not exactly a traditional restoration, Sacramento’s Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament underwent a makeover that restored sacred art, statuary, and stained glass to this formerly whitewashed building. It has almost a baroque look today, with paintings on virtually every surface. Sadly, they stopped short of building a high altar and communion rail.

Here in our cluster, we don’t have to undo damage, but are rather faced with the challenge of preserving and maintaining historic, aging buildings. Much of the day-to-day work, such as the upgrading of St. Josaphat’s communion rail, has been performed by local artisan John Nalepa, whose team of craftsmen was the subject of a 2005 Free Press article.

As guardians of these edifices, we have a role to play: Let us express our love for, and sound catechetical reasons for appreciating, traditional church architecture, to those who are visiting our churches. With proper understanding, perhaps our visitors will be able to help their own parishes pursue sound architectural projects. After all, true beauty attracts people to God, and beauty in a liturgical sense is not subject to whims of fashion. You know it when you see it.