

Tridentine Community News

September 23, 2007

Tridentine Travelogue: Mater Ecclesiae, Berlin, New Jersey

When thinking about longstanding Tridentine Communities, it is not uncommon to read about so-called “independent chapels,” which operate without the local bishop’s approval. These chapels might use priests from the SSPX, from sedevacantist groups (CMRI or SSPV), estranged priests from dioceses or mainstream religious orders, or truly independent priests whose origins and validity of Holy Orders are questionable. In some cases, these chapels are quite vibrant, with sizable, active congregations. The energy of feeling like outsiders or underdogs propels them.

Happily, some of these chapels eventually become regularized with the local diocese. Often this happens because the founding priest becomes incapacitated or passes away.



One such formerly independent community is Mater Ecclesiae Church, in New Jersey across the river from Philadelphia. Begun in 1967 as “Holy Family Monastery,” there was discord and a court battle over title to the real estate. After operating independently for several years, in 2000 they reconciled with Camden Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio in a unique arrangement: The property was deeded to the diocese, with the provision that it could only be used for the Traditional Mass. Ownership reverts to the original group should this no longer be the case. It doesn’t appear that this will be a problem: Mater Ecclesiae grew from 70 to 425 families between 2000-2004. And they support the diocese: They are among the top parishes in Camden’s annual Bishop’s Appeal.

Bishop DiMarzio created Mater Ecclesiae as a non-territorial mission of nearby St. Edward Parish. For all intents and purposes, it is a diocesan Tridentine parish, the first such parish in the United States. It is also the first fully traditional parish to be headed by a diocesan priest. Most such parishes are led by Fraternity of St. Peter or Institute of Christ the King priests. As much as the FSSP and ICRSS deserve our respect and support, we must recognize that the majority of priests are diocesan. For a true renaissance of the Traditional Liturgy to occur, the diocesan clergy must develop a love for it, just as the specialist orders have done. After all, politically it is far more likely that diocesan clergy will become bishops than FSSP or ICRSS members. And they will

be the leaders who will make the decisions about the long term future of the Extraordinary Mass.

A significant reason for Mater Ecclesiae’s success was the bishop’s appointment of Fr. Robert Pasley as rector. An eloquent, enthusiastic, musically sophisticated proponent of the Traditional Liturgy, Fr. Pasley is a well-known speaker in Tridentine circles. He has created not only a thriving parish life, but also an active music program comprised of unusually talented musicians for such a modest facility.



Mater Ecclesiae is perhaps best known for its annual Solemn High Mass on the Feast of the Assumption in Camden’s Immaculate Conception Cathedral. It attracts experienced musicians and demonstrates the solicitude of the diocese towards the Tridentine community.

As the membership of Mater Ecclesiae has increased, they have outgrown their current facilities. The real estate they fought to keep has outlived its usefulness. Fr. Pasley jokes that the place is falling apart and hopes that they can acquire one of the churches closed by the diocese. This kind of situation reminds us how very blessed we are to have our own Tridentine Masses located in two of the most beautiful, historic churches in Windsor and Detroit. We want for very little, facility-wise.

From an outsider’s viewpoint, Mater Ecclesiae’s biggest challenge may be forthcoming post-Motu Proprio Extraordinary Form Masses in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Strangely skimpy on Indult Mass permissions, the Philadelphia Archdiocese is otherwise quite conservative, with perhaps North America’s most impressive cathedral and a myriad of unwreckovated churches. The one thing they have lacked is a sung Tridentine Mass in a prominent, historic, central church, but that is about to change with a newly announced Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Church. Philadelphia families who drive some distance to attend Mater Ecclesiae might think twice. Of course, these are the growing pains that come with the Motu Proprio. We must think of the good to mankind that our Holy Father has done by issuing this document, and not the threats to any existing Tridentine community.

Read more about Mater Ecclesiae at their impressive web site: www.materecclesiae.org.

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