

Tridentine Community News

June 21, 2009

“They Don’t Build ‘em Like This Any More” Or Do They? – Part 2 of 3

Some of the churches and chapels served by the Fraternity of St. Peter and the Institute of Christ the King are either new construction or retrofits of churches built for other denominations. Those churches have a certain beauty, but are often quite small. Because these churches are used exclusively for the Extraordinary Form, high altars against the wall are the norm. Their small size means they often lack an element of the vertical that leaves them out of the league of the majestic kinds



of churches we are mainly addressing in this series of columns. The FSSP’s new church in Naples, Florida, pictured at left, is representative of such projects. This particular photo displays one of the frustrating realities that small churches can impose: The sanctuary is so small that sacred ministers may have to be outside the Communion Rail.

While even small-scale new construction of a traditional style is commendable, it seems that just a little more verticality in the design would achieve a more inspirational atmosphere. Consider Detroit’s Holy Family Church. Holy Family is relatively small, yet its proportionately high ceiling and bounteous sacred art give it the feel of a larger edifice. Adding some height would be possible in new construction of small churches, but is probably not likely when an existing structure is adapted.

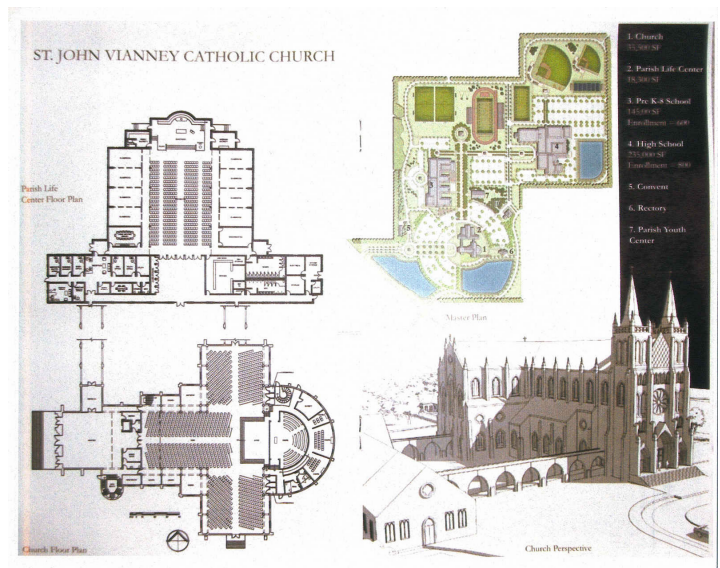
One of the most impressive projects completed in recent years is an SSPX church: St. Isidore the Farmer near Denver, Colorado.



Whatever one thinks of the SSPX, one has to admit that this is an

impressive structure. Construction began in 1999. This church combines all of the elements of traditional church layout specified as the norm by St. Charles Borromeo at the time of the Council of Trent. The priest’s commentary on their web site reveals that much thought went into the symbolism of the various design elements. We submit that St. Isidore could serve as a model or starting point for designing other new churches. It is a case study of beauty without extravagance. A removable freestanding altar is all that would need to be added to make this design additionally suitable for *versus populum* celebration of the Ordinary Form.

Ethan Anthony of HDB/Cram and Ferguson is the custodian of a proud legacy, that of architectural giant Ralph Adams Cram. In metro Detroit, Cram designed Hamtramck’s St. Florian Church and St. Mary of Redford, two magnificent gothic edifices. Anthony’s recent work seems to focus on grand Gothic and Romanesque exteriors (see St. John Vianney, Fishers, Indiana below – a 1500 seat church), with slightly disappointing, more modern interior layouts, making them less suited for the Extraordinary Form. Perhaps this is just a quirk of the kind of projects he has been receiving. One must give him credit for obtaining commissions for relatively large churches, and for selling the notion of classic exteriors in a time when bland, modern design is the norm. As difficult as it might be to imagine such grand churches being built in the Windsor or Detroit suburbs today, Anthony is setting important precedents that will be useful when future building projects are being discussed.



Mr. Anthony has also developed an apparent skill at achieving an expensive look using inexpensive techniques. This is nothing new: Have you noticed that St. Josaphat’s pillars which appear to be marble are actually just decorated plaster? Did you know that the “marble” pillars on St. Josaphat’s high altar are cheap (and loose) pieces of wood? One of our readers, an architect, is no fan of such artificiality. Yet, like fake jewelry or Hollywood sets, such techniques in the hands of a prudent church architect can help produce impressive results when a budget does not permit use of better quality building materials. See more of Ethan Anthony’s work and pending projects at www.hdb.com.