

Tridentine Community News

June 28, 2009

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

In addition to the resurgence of construction of traditionally-designed churches, there is also a growing trend towards church restoration, or “un-wreckovation”. Some diocesan Building Departments are apparently relaxing their restrictions on restorations, which used to be as tightly regulated as new construction. Formerly whitewashed and modified churches are being restored to their original designs or better. High altars are being constructed, communion rails added, and murals painted. Churches both historic and relatively new are being outfitted in traditional, ornate fashion by interior design firms such as Mazzolini Artcraft, Murals by Jericho, King Richard’s, Fynders Keepers, and the granddaddy of them all, Conrad Schmitt Studios.

Schmitt is known for handling some of the largest and most detailed church restoration projects in North America. Stained glass, statuary, murals, and mosaics are all part of their design and construction capabilities. The below photo of Milwaukee’s Basilica of St. Josaphat is an example of the extraordinary level of detail that they are known for. Every nook and cranny of the space is devoted to serious sacred art. The building also makes use of imaginative cove lighting to illuminate some of the murals.



Lower profile local craftsmen also play key roles, such as John Nalepa, who has worked on St. Josaphat, St. Joseph, and many of

Detroit’s historic churches. A beautiful example of the work of individual skilled artisans is the recently restored St. Aloysius Church in Olivia, Minnesota, pictured below.



Restoration can also incorporate new elements that benefit church design. For instance, there are superior lighting technologies available today that can illuminate a church better as well as focus attention on appropriate areas of the sanctuary. A visitor to St. Louis, Missouri’s Shine of St. Joseph will immediately be struck by the impressive, high-tech spotlighting of the high altar. The improved technology of modern sound systems helps everyone hear more clearly what is being preached. More efficient HVAC systems, insulation, and sealing make churches more comfortable and economical to operate. None of this need interfere with the architectural message that classic church design is meant to convey. One must resist the temptation to carry things too far, however. Power Point projection screens would be completely inappropriate to the ethos of the Extraordinary Form liturgy.

What must be done to bring about a wider-ranging return to traditional sacred architecture? First, there must be catechesis concerning the history of and rationale for universal church design standards, especially those established by St. Charles Borromeo. This awareness must be spread among everyone from parishioners, to clergy, to members of diocesan Building Departments, to national Bishops’ Conferences. Church design ideas did not start in 1965. Second, accommodation for possible celebration of the Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass must be made in architectural plans. This trend is growing, and many seminarians have an interest in it; it isn’t going away. The Extraordinary Form mandates certain design elements whose presence reduces the number of opportunities for errors or omissions in the plans. Third, architects and fundraisers need to make convincing cases that there is merit in spending more money to surpass the rec-room look of so many modern churches. Do we really need another drop-ceiling, fluorescent light, simple wooden altar-table design? The Church is not a franchise; all “branches” need not look the same. Newly-established parishes building their first churches, and existing parishes replacing outmoded churches, must make a conscious choice for the sacred rather than the mass-produced look, just as our ancestors did during the local church construction boom years of 1870-1930.

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