

Tridentine Community News

November 28, 2010

An Architectural One-of-a-Kind: Detroit's St. Aloysius Church

The boom years of 1870 – 1929 saw tremendous growth in downtown Detroit and Windsor as the nascent automotive industry attracted population to our region. Office buildings, grand retail stores, and factories were sprouting left and right. Entertainment, too: This was the era of the downtown movie palace. Detroit's Fox, State/Fillmore, Gem, Opera House, Music Hall, and Orchestra Hall; and Windsor's Capitol are living testimonies to the vitality of theatres during the golden age of cinema. Before television captivated society's attention, the theatre was where people went to be entertained. Indeed, Detroit is blessed with so many historic theatres that, as in New York, Los Angeles, and London, tours are regularly offered, a fascinating way to spend a Saturday.

These were also the boom years of church construction. Most of our beautiful historic churches date from this period. In a unique case of life imitating art, one of our local churches departed from the usual Gothic and Romanesque styles to adopt a design rarely if ever seen elsewhere: that of a theatre.

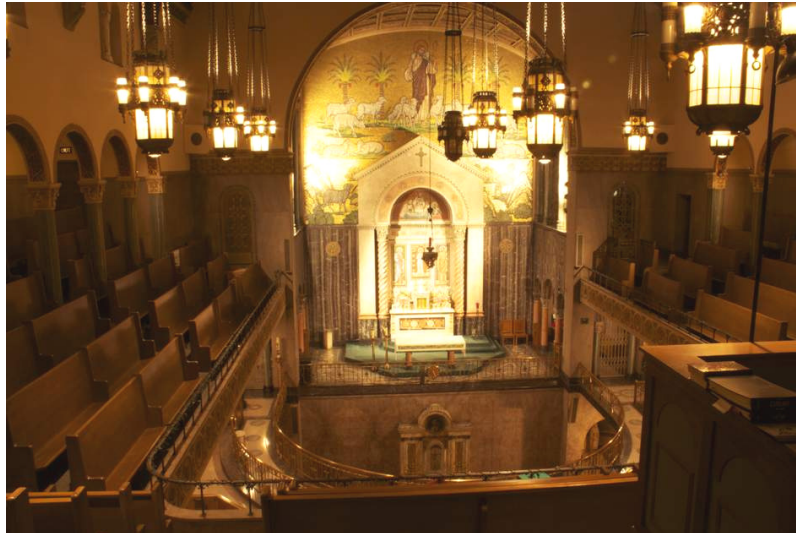
Built in 1930, St. Aloysius Church is located on Washington Boulevard, adjacent to the Archdiocese of Detroit Chancery and Catholic Bookstore. In its heyday, Washington Boulevard was a busy retail district. The recently-reopened Book Cadillac Hotel sits at the southern end, while just north of St. Aloysius sits the Himelhoch Building. Originally the flagship of a local chain of women's fashion stores, Himelhoch's has been converted into an apartment building. Its lobby has been restored to its opulent original condition as a reminder of its retail glory years.

In such a setting, it seems as though St. Aloysius was built to cater to the demand for weekday Masses from downtown office and retail workers. Even in the parish's early days, little housing would have been in close proximity to the church, making Sunday Mass less of a draw. The diocese was faced with the challenge of building a structure that could accommodate both a relatively small number of worshippers on most weekdays, as well as a vastly larger number on major feasts and Holy Days of Obligation. An allied concern was the then-high cost of real estate in a thriving downtown district; the building footprint had to be kept to a minimum. The solution to both challenges: A three-story structure resembling the theatres Detroiters knew well.

On the main floor, a sanctuary is built inside a stage-like proscenium arch. For the majority of weekday Masses, the ground

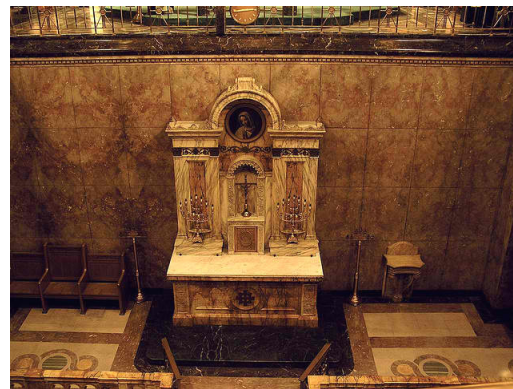
level provides more than adequate seating. To address overflow crowds, a U-shaped balcony was constructed, similar to the wrap-around balcony at the Masonic Temple Theatre. The organ and its console share space with pews in this balcony.

Most interesting of all is the cutout in the main floor, resembling the *Confessio* in front of the Papal Altar at Rome's St. Peter's Basilica. A Communion Rail, used up through the 1980s, surrounds this cutout. Walk up to the rail, and you will see the real



prize: In the lower level, there is a perfectly-preserved marble sanctuary, complete with unmodified High Altar and Communion Rail. The lower level can thus be used for two purposes: It can supplement the balcony to hold overflow crowds, as it has done on Ash Wednesday, for example. Because of the cutout, the faithful seated in the lower level can look upwards and follow Holy Mass being celebrated at the main altar.

The lower level can also be used as a separate, independent church. This would have



accommodated simultaneous Low Masses, during which music from one floor's Mass would not disturb the Mass on the other level. Dare we state the obvious: The sheer

beauty of the untouched, immaculately preserved lower level would make it an ideal location for a special-event Tridentine Mass.

Since 1992, St. Aloysius has been administered by the Franciscan Friars and serves a multicultural parish membership. The parish runs an Outreach Center, in keeping with the Franciscans' tradition of feeding and clothing the poor. [Photo from balcony by Michael Hodges/The Detroit News; Photo of downstairs sanctuary by Sean Doerr/SNWEB.ORG Photography, all rights reserved. Additional photos are available at www.stalsdetroit.com.]

Tridentine Masses This Coming Week

Mon. 11/29 7:00 PM: Low Mass at *St. Josaphat* (Feria of Advent)
Tue. 11/30 7:00 PM: **High** Mass at *both* *Assumption-Windsor* and *St. Josaphat* (St. Andrew, Apostle)

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