

## New church shines with historic treasures

By Manasee Wagh  
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Bucks County Courier Times  
Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Standing on a ladder and wielding a long, slender brush, artist Ed Rogowski leaned over a figure of Jesus on the cross and added the final touches of paint to his shoulders.

Over the past year, he had also painted the gold lettering over the altar, restored a marble statue and spent seven months painstakingly cleaning several paintings hanging at the Stations of the Cross.

“I used bread to clean them. It actually picks up the dirt and dust really well,” he said.

It’s important to Rogowski to be precise, because the Catholic artifacts he’s been working on are historical treasures that have been passed down to Northampton’s St. Bede the Venerable Catholic Church for its recently completed building project.



Kim Weimer / Staff Photographer  
Pat Dorsey, John Chaykin and John Flores install a new steeple on the top of St. Bede the Venerable as part of the church’s restoration project.



A new altar is part of the restoration project under way at St. Bede the Venerable Church in Northampton. Everything on the altar, including the stained glass windows, crucifix, tabernacle and sculptures, is from the Most Blessed Sacrament Church in Southwest Philadelphia that closed in 2007.

The church is named after an eighth-century English monk, known today as a scholar, a teacher and a devout man who wrote an extensive history of the English church and people. The church honors St. Bede for being devoted to the pursuit of truth and the knowledge of God.

As part of its \$5 million task to enlarge and beautify St. Bede, the church incorporated the artifacts of the former Most Blessed Sacrament Church in Southwest Philadelphia, which was built in 1924 and closed in 2007 due to a declining congregation. The parish dates back to 1901.

Now the church’s mosaic-inlaid marble statuary, its stained glass windows and rich oil paintings adorn St. Bede.

Ordinarily when a church closes, its artwork and holy objects are split among many churches. The Philadelphia church offered St. Bede Pastor Msgr. John C. Marine the entire set of artifacts to buy.

“We’re the very fortunate recipients,” he said. “The legacy of faith of that parish is now carried by us.”

In November, the former parishioners of Most Blessed Sacrament Church are invited to the Northampton church for a reunion, where they’ll be able to look upon a part of their old church again, Marine said.

Seen from the outside, the most noticeable feature of St. Bede is new construction at either end of the formerly simple rectangular structure. At one end is a new space housing its altar and tabernacle, adorned almost entirely by artifacts from the Philadelphia church. The front vestibule is also new.

White columns now cover the A-shaped wooden frames that extend down the walls. The columns helped the church with its Neoclassical transformation. New pews, paint and decorative, stone-like flooring give the older section in the middle a fresh look. Several new shrines for saints are located along the walls, creating small devotional areas throughout the church.

“It makes the church a more prayerful experience for people,” said Marine. “They can find corners of quiet and solace as well as community.”

While some of St. Bede’s earlier features remain, such as the stained glass window depicting St. Bede over the front door, most of them have been moved to a chapel below the main church, which will be used for weekday Mass. The church’s electrical, sound and air conditioning systems were also updated.

The original St. Bede church was completed in 1967 as a temporary structure for a growing parish, said Marine. The Rev. James Martin, the pastor at the time, planned to build a new church on the grounds and turn the structure into a gymnasium for a Catholic school, which exists today.

When the parish started planning in earnest for a new church about four years ago, it made more sense to add to the existing building rather than disturb the existing athletic fields, parking and school grounds, Marine said.

“This took a lot of fundraising and financial effort. Parishioners have been very generous,” he said.

With a goal to raise \$4.5 million, the parish has about \$800,000 to go, said Marine. The congregation formed various committees to carry out the plan, and funding came from pledges, donations, fundraisers and even bequests by people who wouldn’t live to see the results, he said.

Several parishioners in the building trades have worked on the project, said F. Anthony Canuso Sr., the chairman of Canuso Jordan, the project’s construction manager.

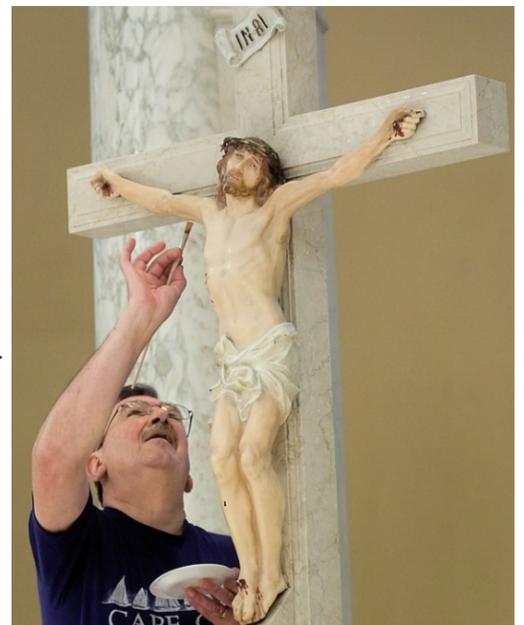
The building is finally complete after a year and a half of construction. Workers are adding the final details this week.

The resulting church is the fulfillment of Martin’s vision, said Marine. It supports the parish’s 3,300 households and 10,500 registered parishioners, according to the Website, at [www.st-bede.org](http://www.st-bede.org).

Nancy Garback, a parishioner since 1999, said the work has beautifully improved the church. As a fiscally conservative individual, she was initially opposed to the project. But a behind-the-scenes tour of the old church convinced her.

“I was really shocked by how antiquated the electrical system was, and the sound system was very poor,” she said. “I was floored by how our altar was like a temporary table. The floor of the altar shook when anyone walked. You felt the pews could break. It still was not an easy sell for me, but if we were going to spend so much money, we might as well take the time and do it right. I’m happy with the result. I feel very good when I know in my heart that this work will last another 40 years. I picture my daughter getting married there.”

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput will dedicate and consecrate St. Bede on Saturday.



Artist and parishioner Ed Rogowski fixes imperfections on a crucifix on the altar of St. Bede the Venerable Church in Northampton as part of the church’s restoration project.