

CULTURE

Renovating To Reflect The Divine At St. Bede's

"[T]he general Catholic drift in the United States is not, to put it gently, toward the beautiful. That's not just an aesthetic problem. It's a serious religious and theological problem."

— George Weigel, *Letters To A Young Catholic* (2004)

By GREGORY J. SULLIVAN
FOR THE BULLETIN



St. Bede the Venerable Church parish in Holland, Pa., is currently undergoing a \$5 million renovation, utilizing many elements taken from the closing of Most Blessed Sacrament Church in Philadelphia.

Courtesy of St. Bede the Venerable Church

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) resulted in many dramatic changes in the life of the Church. Following the Council, though certainly not caused by any of its teachings, church architecture went into steep decline. Whereas Catholic churches were once the most attractive and often arresting buildings in any area, the structures built in the decades since the Council have been characterized, with the rarest exceptions, by their striking blandness and even ugliness, resembling secular meeting halls rather than sacred temples.

But at St. Bede the Venerable parish in Holland, Pa., the majesty of Catholic worship and architecture is triumphantly returning. Following a feasibility study that demonstrated reluctance on the part of parishioners to support the construction of an entirely new church, the pastor of St. Bede, Monsignor John Marine, has commenced an ambitious capital campaign to raise more than \$5 million to renovate the church building, which the feasibility study disclosed is widely supported by the parish.

This project is not just a modest enhancement of the current functional, but plain structure. It is a comprehensive renovation that is the product of the for-

fortunate confluence of three key components: an energetic pastor with a rich appreciation of the church's mission, a gifted architect and magnificent artifacts from a closed parish in Philadelphia. In 2010, St. Bede will open its door to a very appealing future by its wise embrace of the artistic and architectural past.

Monsignor Marine, a former Dean of Formation at St. Charles Seminary, Vicar for Montgomery County, and now, since June of 2005, pastor at St. Bede, recognized immediately the opportunity presented by the closing of Most Blessed Sacrament Church in Philadelphia. He

obtained its marble altar with Leonardo's "The Last Supper" depicted, baldachino, confessionals, pews, and century-old stained-glass windows made in Bavaria. (Pictures of these artifacts can be seen on St. Bede's Web site at www.st-bede.org.)

Monsignor Marine then hired the architect Duncan Stroik of the University of Notre Dame. He based this selection on what he calls Mr. Stroik's "national and international reputation for fostering a rebirth of classical Catholic Church architecture." It is a reputation that is well deserved. (A sampling of Mr. Stroik's spectacular designs and restora-

tions is found at www.stroik.com.) What is more, Mr. Stroik is a trenchant analyst and critic of the architectural problems that have arisen since the Council and an eloquent advocate for his traditional designs. His writing is lucid and very accessible to the nonspecialist. In one essay, "The Classical Moment," he writes:

"The Roman Catholic Church is timeless, enduring and permanent. So the church building is a prolepsis, or anticipation of the future; a three-dimensional introduction into the heavenly kingdom. It promises us future glory, and is a place which should make us desire to 'dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' In expressing the inexpressible, the mysterious, the beatific vision, the church is a place of eternity amidst the suffering and temporality of life."

For the specific project at St. Bede, Mr. Stroik is a perfect selection: he is an expert in taking A-frame church buildings — like the structure of St. Bede — and transforming them into something dramatically superior. St. Bede, in fact, was initially intended as a temporary design. Monsignor Marine points out that the planned renovation will provide an "enduring, permanent, beautiful, and inspiring church" that is consistent with the vision of the founding pastor, Father James Martin (who was pastor for 13 years and died in 1978).

The capital campaign for this project is just beginning, and Monsignor Marine hopes that it "will unite our parish even more so as we together build God's house, which is the Church." He

also emphasizes that beautiful churches serve as tools of catechesis and evangelization. A more elegant church building enhances and strengthens the moral life. The story of the faith is told in many ways — in Scripture, in holy lives, in painting — and the Church has always understood that it is told in very memorable and awe-inspiring form in architecture.

Once completed, St. Bede's renovation, though vastly different from its current design, will paradoxically be an enduring embodiment of the church's continuity. As Philadelphians continue to move to the suburbs, the city parishes lose members and must in some cases close. But their beautiful artifacts are, with the St. Bede's renovation, serving the new vibrant centers of the faith — they are moving with the people of God. That history thus enriches the present and future life of faith at St. Bede.

Churches that communicate the transcendence of the Christian faith are emphatically not things of the past. Too many recent projects have, to be sure, been catastrophic monuments to modernist and postmodernist ugliness. The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles is a recent example and the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland is a brand-new example of this problem. But the return to the august tradition of art and architecture that the Church possesses is taking place at the parish level at St. Bede the Venerable.

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