

Tour of the New Church

Begin either in the narthex or at the fountain.

Over twenty years ago, our parish dedicated the first building of our parish facility. Then our land area was only 10 acres. Today it is 20 acres. That first building was a multipurpose building, which has been the typical strategy for beginning new churches in the rapidly growing suburbs. The expectation was always that we would build a permanent church, exclusively dedicated to the worship of God.

More than five years ago, serious planning for our new building began. We were motivated by growth. We had outgrown our current facility, which was designed to hold 500. The overflow space was fitted with a video projector, and even though it could never be considered as the best situation, over 1500 parishioners watched Mass on television every Sunday. Now, we have constructed a church that has a seating capacity of over 1,000.

As we walk through the new facility, we will point out some of the design requirements that we had from the very beginning. A small building committee met to formulate the design, and even before we interviewed architects, we prepared what we called the scope document that outlined our needs. This document was used throughout to guide us.

The Courtyard

The first design requirement was the courtyard. The current courtyard was a parking lot. We had two concerns that needed to be satisfied by the new construction. We needed to be able to tie the existing buildings to the new construction. Since the old buildings did not follow an architectural style, we used the courtyard to help connect all the buildings together. More important than that, was the need for outdoor gathering space. While finances oftentimes limit how we do this, a church is, in one respect, the house for a community. Two phrases describe a catholic church. It is the “house of God,” but it is also the “house of the church,” the gathering of God’s people. So, the architecture of the church needs to help us be the church. The use of a fountain as a focal point is very common all over the world. There are even famous events in the Bible that involve people meeting at wells (Jacob and Rachael; Jesus and the Samaritan Woman), or rivers (John the Baptist). Water is an important natural symbol, and the sound of moving water is both calming and interesting.

The Narthex

The Narthex is a gathering space. It is similar to the courtyard in this way. The large central doors or the “great doors” are important, both architecturally and liturgically. They symbolize the parish’s welcome of our community. In some places certain doors are only used on special occasions. These doors are fourteen feet tall, and hand-made of

solid black walnut. They are intended to last for many lifetimes. Some of the business of preparing for the Mass is conducted here, in the narthex. We have an information table, and the doors into support areas, restrooms, nursery and vesting sacristy are through there (*point east*). But the primary purpose is for people to have a place to greet one another and share joys, sorrows and needs. Typically, a narthex is not a devotional space, so that the conversations that are necessary in greeting one another can comfortably take place.

The Nave

(Gather near the baptismal font. People may be seated. Please remember that without amplification your voice will not carry as far as you think, only about fifteen feet.)

This part of the church is traditionally called the nave. It is a unique word but it finds its origin in the Latin word for ship (“naves”). Some architectural plans look like an inverted ship. As well, since the nave is the central place where the people sit, it looks something like a Roman galley, where slaves sat on benches and powered the ship with oars.

One of the requirements that we gave our architect was that we wanted the church to be filled with natural light. While this may seem to be a simple request, it is, in fact, difficult to accomplish. We have to be concerned about light tracing across the building interior, blinding people and making things uncomfortable. Actually, an aspect of Gothic architecture was originally an attempt to fill the space of the church with natural light. But it proved to be too much, and stained glass followed, sometimes making the buildings appear dark and gloomy. We have a bit of a problem here with light tracing and our stained glass windows are designed to help with that. We employed the use of a window tinting film temporarily on the windows in the nave to help cut down some light. Eventually, garden walls and more landscaping will accomplish this in a more appealing manner, and we will remove the film.

The ceilings were designed to hide the sources of light. The upper ceiling reflects light from the high clear story windows that are visible from the outside, but not the inside. The natural lighting is indirect. The lower side ceilings hide the artificial light source. The only other light comes from the sconces and aisle-way pendants. The lack of ceiling chandeliers was intended to leave the upper space of the church completely open and unobstructed, to give us a reminder of the mystery of the heavens above us.

Baptismal Font

As we stand here, we need to talk about visual focal points. The baptism font may be the first thing people notice. It stands here as a constant reminder of our entry into the church, and our touching the water and making the sign of the cross, renews our sense of belonging to God and his church. The flowing water reminds us of the living water that Jesus spoke of in the Gospel of John (**John 4:10**). The font is made in the shape of a

cross because, as St. Paul tells us (**Romans 6:3**) we have been baptized into Christ's death. As we die to self, so we live to God in Christ Jesus.

The connection between the font and the altar is made in two ways. They are related by their placement on the central axis of the church, and they are constructed of the same material. The stone is called "shell limestone" because of the numerous fossilized shells imbedded in it. This is a common type of stone found throughout the world, wherever ancient sea beds were once located. It is especially common in the hill country of Texas, from which this came. The shell is a very old symbol of baptism, and is found throughout the world in many different parts of church architecture.

Pews

The pews are a custom design specifically for this building. Pews probably go unnoticed, and perhaps these will as well. We don't often think of how much an impact pews make on a space. At first, people thought of these as being too modern, but now that they are here it is hard to imagine another design. They are designed, as is the whole building, to communicate a sense of lightness, welcome and peacefulness. The floating plane, held up by the black walnut dowels is an imitation of the ceiling. All the furniture in the building follows this design. The pews are solid maple, trimmed with black walnut. They were constructed by **New Holland** of Pennsylvania.

Color and Materials

The decision to use the limestone treatments directed most of the other color choices. We tried to maintain a narrow color palette, using only a small range of earthen colors. The offsetting treatments of black walnut help to break up or identify the spaces. As a result, when color is added, through vestments or banners, the space becomes a canvass, and the colors seem more alive.

Sound and Acoustics

The acoustics of the space are one area where there is a great deal of risk involved. Two things need to happen in terms of sound. We must be able to hear and understand the spoken word, and we must allow the music the vibrancy and brightness it needs, in order to participate in the worship of God. Great church music needs a little bit of echo, resonance or reverberation. Being able to understand the spoken word is more difficult in that same sort of space. We achieved some balance with the wood ceiling panels that have sound absorbing material behind them. The sound amplification system employs some of the most advanced technology available. Sound is a great mystery in the church, and a place where many buildings fail to do their job. We will pray over this one and hope that our desire to get it right pays off.

(We can move forward to the front so that we can see a few things better.)

The Cross Shape

The shape of the church floor plan is one of the most significant factors in designing a church. Ours is a “cross” shape with the central nave forming the vertical leg of the cross, and the two transepts forming the horizontal arms. Although this shape is common to ancient buildings, the lack of materials that could easily span large spaces lead to some of the most innovative and beautiful construction pieces. Roman arches and a variety of vaults were invented to carry the load of the roof across a large open space. Our steel frame construction has removed the need for those, but we have simulated the feel of those ancient building elements in the shape of the upper roof over the nave. From the outside, the cross shape floor plan directs the architecture in such a way that it is unmistakable as a church. While we have tried to create a welcoming and warm space, the cross shape tends to be a little more formal.

One of the interesting things about our building is that the transepts are designed and constructed in a way that allows them to be expanded. The thin wall below the round window can be removed and the shape of the chapel added to the end of the transept.

The Altar

Obviously, the main focal points of the church are the altar, tabernacle and crucifix. These describe why we are here. Of these three, the one that cannot be dispensed with is the altar. It is the most important focal point, and it is, therefore, placed on the axis (the center line) of the main nave and the transepts. Once again, the altar is constructed of shell limestone and weighs over 5,000 pounds.

(If the lights are all on.) We have designed the lighting in the church to further enhance the focus of the crucifix, tabernacle and altar.

The Tabernacle

The bronze doors of the tabernacle have emblazoned on their face the **chi ro**, what look like an “x” and a “p”. They are the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ and are a traditional monogram for our Lord. According to Catholic norms, a parish can have only one tabernacle. Yet, the Blessed Sacrament is the most attractive object of our devotion. We seek to be in the Lord’s presence when we come to the church. In this configuration, we can see the tabernacle and be assured of the Lord’s presence from both the chapel and the main nave.

The Crucifix

The crucifix was carved in Ortisie, Italy by **Ferdinando Perathanor**. It is seven feet, eight inches tall. It is an unusual style. Jesus bears all the marks of the passion, including the wound in his side, which actually occurred after he died. Yet Jesus’ eyes

are open, and he is looking at us with a haunting and questioning appearance. The artist has left it to us to interpret the unique carving.

Stations of the Cross

The Stations of the Cross were made by a young artist, the son of a member of our parish. His name is **Cody Harrington**, and he has an incredible talent for reproducing what he sees. They are done in pencil on 11" by 17" paper and then enlarged, using a very advanced printing process. They were inspired by the film "**The Passion of the Christ.**" While this film does not include all of the 14 Stations of the Cross, the frames and still photographs of the movie were used as models for the drawings. The emotion and gravity of the images reflect an aspect of Christ's Passion that is usually stylized. Here, the reality of Jesus' suffering is a powerful and moving force.

Transept Windows

The stained glass windows were executed by **Adrian Cavallini** of San Antonio.

The symbols in the two transept windows are traditional Catholic symbols. On the east side is the symbol of the Blessed Mother's share in the sufferings of Christ. Its origin is the prophecy of the Temple priest given at the presentation of Jesus:

"Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself, a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.""

Luke 2:34-35

The descending dove is, of course, the symbol of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. These two symbols remind us of the kind of loving sacrifice that is to be the character of the Christian life, as we follow the example of Mary and the power to accomplish it, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Angel Windows

The angels above the altar and sanctuary are inspired by the scripture,

"You nourished your people with food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven."

Wisdom 16:20

Although originally referring to the manna given in the desert, this passage has always been seen by the church as an Old Testament prefiguring of the Mass. Another passage from the New Testament,

“I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing.””

Revelation 5:11-12

St. Jude and other statues

Again, all the statuary was carved in northern Italy and represent commissioned designs. Fr. Tim went to Italy to sit in the shop of the woodcarver and collaborate on the exact representations of the saints that expressed our parish’s spirit. These include the statue of the **Blessed Mother with the child Jesus**. We wanted to capture an aspect of the maternal affection of Mary. In a gentle gesture of care, she holds the child asleep on her lap.

The statue of **St. Jude** is a traditional representation. He holds a shepherd’s staff as a symbol of his role as an Apostle, and holds a medallion of the face of Jesus. Various traditions connect St. Jude to an image of Jesus’ face that had healing properties. St. Jude, our patron, is also the patron saint of hopeless causes. We thank him for helping us thus far.

Two additional statues will be placed in the empty niches: **St. Martin de Porres** and **St. Joseph with the boy Jesus**. They will arrive from the woodcarver sometime in January.

Chapel

(Please move folks into the chapel.)

The chapel follows some of the design concept of the main church. The glass walls connect us to the outside, and allow for a large amount of natural light. The large stone wall gives the small chapel a sense of primitiveness and a connection to antiquity. The stone altar of the same shell limestone is the same design as the large altar. The seating is in chairs to allow for flexibility. We can alter the configuration for small funerals and weddings. We can seat 98 in the current configuration.

The Chapel Statues

Bishop Grahmann graciously allowed us to dedicate the chapel in honor of **Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta**. Mother Teresa devoted herself to caring for the most neglected poor. She became an important prophetic voice for the unborn and homeless children, asking that unwanted children be sent to her, so that she could care for them. Thus, she holds a child in her arms. Perhaps she will be seen as an ally to our efforts to end abortion and the neglect of children.