

## Repair, Renovation, and Restoration

The present St. Michael's Church is over 90 years old. Not surprisingly it had undergone several episodes of renovation. The History Room in the basement of St. Michael's includes pictures of the interior design and decoration through various periods of the parish's history. People are invited to review this pictorial history. A major renovation was undertaken in 1951. That particular color scheme and arrangement lasted until 1985. In the meantime came the reforms of Vatican II calling for changes that would bring the people closer to the celebration of the Mass and allow a more full participation. For a number of years the Parish made do with a temporary altar and pulpit. Finally in 1983, the present altar of sacrifice and ambo or pulpit were installed. Looking forward to renovation, the parish moved in 1979 to tuckpoint and repair the brick exterior of the church.

At a later date, 1984, the pastor, the trustees, the finance committee and the parish council gathered to discuss renovation and repair of the church. There was a clear feeling that the renovations would follow certain guidelines:

- 1) To maintain the architectural integrity and style of the church
- 2) To follow present liturgical guidelines within the context of our architectural setting
- 3) To resist any urge to force upon our architectural setting incongruent elements (such as a modern stark auditorium setting).
- 4) To maintain and renovate those furnishings of the church which reflected workmanship and craftsmanship.
- 5) To retain those symbolic elements of the church with which the parish had a strong attachment and identity.
- 6) To brighten the church and improve the color scheme.
- 7) To make appropriate features more elegant.
- 8) To most especially preserve the prayerful and sacred atmosphere.

After considering different renovating firms, the parish council, on recommendation of a lay decorating committee, decided on Conrad Schmitt Studios of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They had been responsible for the decoration of such monumental churches as St. Josephat's Basilica and St. Stanislaus Church in Milwaukee.

Schmitt Studio experts studied the church and proclaimed it "an architectural jewel with beautiful lines and fine craftsmanship on many levels. But many of the features had been masked by overly vivid colors and other features had deteriorated and exhibited dirt and grim. Many features were difficult to see in the darkened and somber atmosphere.

The Conrad Schmitt craftsmen arrived in September 1985. Richard Sierlecki was supervisory artist. The artists assessed the décor of the entire structure. They modified the imposing chancel arch keeping the designs and emphasizing details in gold leaf.

They preserved the frieze along the top of the walls, highlighting in gold leaf the egg and dart molding. They provided new stencils for the window frames and for the high vault (where none had been before). They strengthened Christ's figure in the sanctuary mural introducing elements of Christ's glorification and emphasizing his divine as well as human nature. They improved the angels in the mural giving them a more spiritual character (and making them resemble angels in the same apse sixty years before). They repainted the altars and sanctuary furnishings and accented them with gold leaf in appropriate places. They improved the finish on the statuary and replaced broken capitals on the pillars, and gilded the altar of sacrifice and the ambo. All the pews were refinished and revarnished to reflect the original oak. John Carlson was the craftsman in that project. The statistics for the decoration renovation were impressive. The crew put up 25 tons of scaffolding, in many cases up to heights of 40 feet. They used over 200 gallons of paint and finishes. They painted 2100 feet of stenciling and they laid in 445 square feet of gold leaf in 22K hammered gold. St. Michael's became a newly polished jewel.

Many other improvements and repairs were undertaken. The electrical system was updated. Wooden beams and supports under the balcony were replaced with steel and iron beams and pillars. The nave lights were also redone. New floor coverings were introduced.

The restoration of St. Michael's has continued, particularly after the disastrous flood of 1997 which inundated the entire Grand Forks-East Grand Forks community. Every parish building, school and parish house in particular, was affected. The flood left over three feet of water in the church's basement and social rooms. (The water never reached the nave and sanctuary level!) Nonetheless this necessitated a two year program of restoration and rebuilding which began with the stripping of the basement area to the very foundation. All the infrastructure of the church below the ground level had to be replaced. The outside surfaces of the foundation walls were water-proofed and tile and sumps were installed. Kitchens, meeting rooms, bathroom had to be rebuilt and totally furnished down to the china and flatware. The steps and stairways to the church were dismantled and rebuilt. Interior brick walls were restored with new brick. All furnishings were replaced. Even damaged heirlooms like the Bishop's chair were reclaimed and restored to original grandeur. (The devoted labor of Jeff Whalen.) Finally at a cost of over one million dollars and thousands of hours of labor, some donated by parishioners, the entry ways and social halls of St. Michael's were open for activities in the Spring of 2000.

Care of the "body" of St. Michael's continues. In 2000 a refurbishing project focused on the sacristy. Early in 2001, additional lighting was installed in the soffit of the vaults between the colonnades and the load bearing walls. In the fall of 2001, the Henning Restorations firm of Lake Elmo, Minnesota, erected some 20 tons of scaffolding for

interior surface repairs (much of it flood moisture related). Under the supervision of Doug Henning, cleaning and repainting took place, keeping the basic décor of the 1984 restoration and respecting the guidelines set up by the 1984 Building Committee decisions. To reflect more adequately an early St. Michael's décor, the figure of Christ in the apse was surrounded with light blue sky and clouds. The Henning firm completed the work at the beginning of Advent 2001. An ornate Italian jubilee icon cross was installed at the time on the sacristy-chapel wall screen. This was the work of Alexander Bucci. It represents a fitting conclusion to St. Michael's Parish's flood reconstruction period.

Architectural terms and designations throughout this publication were checked against the Oxford Dictionary of Architecture by James Stevens Curl (Oxford University Press, 1999).