

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REVIEW

The Restoration of St. Patrick's

Feb 12 2014 - 2:21pm | [Ashley McKinless](#)

On March 17, 2012, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York unveiled ambitious plans to restore St. Patrick's Cathedral, which he described as "America's parish church and the soul of the capital of the world." The restoration is projected to cost roughly \$175 million and to be finished in December 2015. The folks at St. Patrick's were kind enough to give me a behind the scenes (or -- up in the ceilings) tour of some of the renovation projects inside the church.



Phase one of the project, cleaning the exterior of the 80-foot spires, was completed last year and the scaffolding that covered the tops of the cathedral's towers has been removed.



While scaffolding covers much of the church's interior, it has remained open to churchgoers and tourists alike throughout the restoration.





St. Patrick's, which opened its doors in 1879, is being restored with all the tools the 21-century has to offer—even iPads. Here, a construction worker checks instructions on the day's work.



All the stained glass is being cleaned and the protective glazing that was put on the windows in the 1970s (and that inadvertently turned them a reddish color) is being removed and replaced.



About 50 percent of the stain glass panels have been cleaned so far, including the Rose Window.



Scaffolding covers the organ loft at the west end of the nave. A number of organ pipes were removed to be repaired, and those that remained were covered to protect them from dust.



A view of the sanctuary from the organ loft.



Each of the red decorative bosses that adorn the ceiling have a unique design. The plastered ceiling vaults will soon be scrubbed clean and repainted.



A new fire-suppression system that relies on mist, instead of large amounts of water that would cause structural damage, has been installed.



This stained glass window located behind the organ loft is not visible from anywhere in the sanctuary. It

was "rediscovered" during the restoration project and is now being returned to its former brilliance. That such a beautiful panel is hidden from human eyes reminds us that cathedrals are ultimately built "for the greater glory of God."



When work made its way up to the cathedral's attic, which had not been entered in decades, a shed was discovered that had neat graffiti detailing how often the bell piece inside had been rung and on what day from around 1905.



The one-of-a-kind timepiece found inside (made by E. Howard and Co., the premier timepiece makers at the time) had been out of use for some time, but was previously used to chime the daily Angelus.



The large and ornate piece was sent to clock restorers in Connecticut who offered to fix it for free. Once it has been fully restored, it will be put on display at the cathedral.



St. Patrick's has 19 bells, installed in the north tower of the cathedral in 1898.



The bells range in weight from 137 lbs to 6,608 lbs and bear a Latin inscription by Philip Cordella, S.J.



Until 1952, the bells were rung by hand. With the bequest of a parishioner, the bells were electrified and connected to a keyboard in the sanctuary below. On April 8, 1952, the Tuesday of Holy Week, "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name" became the first song to ring forth from the bells.



Fire inspectors over the years have marked the windows in the upper reaches of the cathedral's towers with their initials and the date. While the windows are due for a cleaning, some of these inscriptions, including those made by firefighters who perished on Sept. 11, 2001, will be preserved.



A wall inscription made by one "AL" in 1898.



A view of the church from behind the main altar, facing the west nave.



Despite the din of construction, visitors to St. Patrick's continue to pray and offer votive candles at the many beautiful shrines that flank the cathedral.



(Photos by Ashley McKinless.)

COMMENTS

Bill Mazzella | 3/1/2014 - 10:59am

Ashley,

Thank you for this overview of the renovation. I am happy that this project has provided employment for many people. After that I regret that I have many negative observations. If we accept that a

Cathedral or any Catholic Church should be appropriate for the celebration by God's people of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus, then this project can only be termed misdirected. At least not as a church. Museum yes. Of course, the rulers of the church forgot about Jesus in that crucial fourth century when pomp and ceremony took over the church of Jesus. The bishops pulled the rabbit out of the hat by convincing people that donations should go to the church who would give it to the poor. We see where that went. Dolan even admitted that he is re-examining his opulence view. Strangely, Francis looks crazy talking about the poor when the bishops have reveled in gold and silver for centuries.

Yesterday I observed the Eucharist being celebrated here. What I saw provides more evidence for the incongruity and bad liturgy of this magnificent structure. Jesus came to set the captives free. "The BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM...." (But if you can wait I can arrange for you to get married at the main altar..)

Yet we see, to quote Timothy Dolan: "Fat balding bishops" parading around an enormous cavern with the celebrants trek from the altar to the communion rail taking up a good part of the ceremony. There is hardly an appearance of the banquet of the Lord in which the downtrodden celebrate their redemption. Instead there is Gucci wear walking to communion while a threatening guard (is he Constantine's?) strongly observes the approaching communicants to make sure no one say or do anything untoward. Let them eat cake but recapture the communion wafer! The people looked refined. But do they look redeemed?

When the renovation is finished sell it and make a museum of it. Then build a place for the church, the people, I know there is a history of people identifying with church buildings. While admirable it is misdirected. The building is not the church. The people in it are the church. Vatican II tried to restore this notion. Francis is strengthening this core belief.

Frank Langone, the principal force behind the fund raising for the renovation, complained that Francis was too hard on the rich. Not too hard, Frank. He was helping you with your priorities. He was showing you a more excellent way.

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Tom Helwick | 3/1/2014 - 11:10am

Bill,

Thank you for such an insightful response to this article, I dare say that if the Lord were walking about today I think he'd be mingling with residents of a homeless shelter or standing in line at a soup kitchen. Yes indeed, Jesus has left THAT building!

Tom

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George Harmanos | 3/4/2014 - 8:51am

Tom,

Many Catholic-Christians have also left THAT building with Jesus.

George

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GERALD BRADLEY | 3/4/2014 - 9:40am

While we continue to open our hearts to the Joy of the Gospel, our thinking about the Church needs more 'opening'. Here's some considerations: the Temple was both a blessing and a 'scandal' to the People of God and so buildings for worship and prayer will both serve and distort our Faith. Signs and Sacraments as things don't reveal to US (individually, collectively, in every age, past, present, and future), the Mystery of the Father and His relation to All. So much is 'good enough' and not 'bad enough' if we look closely with the Joy we share.

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Roy Van Brunt | 3/4/2014 - 9:46am

How many of New York's poor and homeless could have been fed and cared for if the Cardinal had re-thought that decision? Bricks and mortar versus care for the poor. Still lessons to be learned by the hierarchy it seems. But nice that "his" cathedral should look pretty for the tourists I guess. For shame.

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THOMAS BRZOZOWSKI | 3/4/2014 - 10:46am

With the closure of the next Catholic school... one wonders if the \$175 million could have been better spent giving a child a safe place to learn, or some poor soul a warm place to sleep, or a young woman with an unplanned pregnancy a place to stay before and after the baby arrives. My parents sacrificed to pay our Catholic school tuitions. They could have had a nicer home, nicer cars, nicer vacations, larger 401K... but they said it was all about priorities. "America's parish church" seems to have misplaced priorities. When I was hungry... you spent millions cleaning stained glass?

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WILLIAM ATKINSON | 3/4/2014 - 12:56pm

If the Jesus was walking about today he would be in GITMO, as a rebel rousing rogue roustabout terrorist, condemning all those that would spend millions on cement, mortar and bricks: heed the WORD, and follow His advice, like the words of Pope Francis, return to prayer and sacrifice, down to the people of His Father, Archbishop of NY would be well advised to listen to the Word and follow His calling.

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Matt Nannery | 3/4/2014 - 4:33pm

oh, well... that's just too much money.

how can we feel good about this.

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GERALD BRADLEY | 3/4/2014 - 7:47pm

The real question is not what Jesus would do, but what are we doing. In fact, Jesus is doing what we, the Church, do and that includes more than the hierarchy. Yes, at times the government of the Church, in the past and even now, is not much better than OUR government. Have we always been as critically generous to the poor or are we only talking, or at best, aspiring? Just about everyone finds it easier to judge others more harshly than themselves. And if this doesn't apply to these 'commenters', then look for more verbal stones to toss and complain how much better the rich and clergy would be if they realized that you and I think we have been anointed to tear down and not build up!

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Gerard Doyle | 3/5/2014 - 9:43am

The renovation of St Pats NYC to ensure this prominent Cathedral remains safe, remains open and remains a visible beacon and symbol of hope through Christ - in a very visible world city - is a very wise, valuable and important project for everyone. In a secular world that steadily works to push out and silence Catholicism and Christ's words - there is nothing the secular world (and the Media) would like more, than for all prominent traces of Catholicism (such as major Cathedrals to close and disappear outright from public view). This project literally keeps Catholicism front and center in public view. This restoration project is a very wise long term strategy and Catholics everywhere should stand together and support it, and show we will not let the secular world win in their constant attempts to push us into irrelevance. Stand up ladies and men - stand up. What we do now affects our kids and grandkids world. God Bless.

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George Trejos | 3/5/2014 - 1:12pm

It is too easy to look at the 175 million price tag and deem this project too costly or not in the spirit of relieving the needs of the poor. The older I get the more I understand the significance of the gospel passage about the presence of the poor among us. Yes, the money can relieve the plight of many but once spent, the need of others will resurface. The poor serve as a reminder to us to see Jesus in them and promote us to charity and assistance. As another pointed out, we ought not pass judgment on what others do with their resources, but what we are doing to relieve the needs of our neighbors.

With that said, the custodians of St. Patrick also have an obligation to preserve the integrity of a beautiful house of worship. The recent film, The Monument Men, emphasizes the significance and importance in preserving the artistic and creative achievements of our culture. Buildings are part of that heritage. In NYC where too frequently structures are demolished to give rise to newer and higher structures, it is refreshing to see St. Patrick renovated as a testament of Faith and our devotion to God. The tourists, rich and poor, who visit there can't help but be inspired and sense the presence of the Divine within its hallowed walls.

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Bill Mazzella | 3/5/2014 - 2:40pm

Looks like the Chancery sent out some spinners. It might help us to ask why is it that we came to this

point when we not only accept, but applaud, the outrageous amount of money the bishops control. In our guts we were convinced that giving to the church was the most holy and beneficial way to help others. Believe it or not this thinking came to fruition in the sixth century when acres of real estate and wealth fell into the bishop's hands. In the sixth century and onwards disturbing the lands of the bishops was tantamount to robbing the poor. Read this quote from Peter Brown:

"Let us, therefore, linger a little on the implications of the cluster of expectations that gathered around the wealth of the church and its relation to the care of the poor. What exactly did contemporaries mean when they spoke of the estates of the church as the "patrimonies of the poor"? In this, we are dealing with the construction of a model of society that carried a considerable imaginative charge, derived from very real preoccupations in society at large. These preoccupations were shared by both those who administered the wealth of the church and those who contributed to that wealth as donors. In the long run, it had palpable effects, on the ground, for the deployment of wealth by the bishops. For it soaked the routine administration of the wealth of the church with a pathos and a sense of the untouchable that was lacking in any form of lay landownership. In the first place, the notion that the wealth of the church was the wealth of the poor was mobilized to ensure that the administration of church lands was kept clean. To disperse, embezzle, or misuse these properties was to rob the innumerable, helpless persons for whom this wealth was said to be held in trust. Appeals to the rights of the poor brought to bear a heavy language of disapprobation on erring bishops and clergymen. The very last *Senatus consultum* of which we know was issued by the Senate of Rome in 532 .

Brown, Peter (2012-09-02). *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (p. 507). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

It was inscribed on marble plaques that were set up in the great courtyard of Saint Peter's. It concerned church property. It warned competing candidates in an upcoming papal election that they should not mortgage the lands of the church for funds to support their election campaigns: "In such a way the properties of the poor are burdened with debt so as to pay for election promises." In the opinion of the Senate of Rome, to rob the poor in this manner was unpardonable. But the appeal to the notion of the poor as the victims par excellence of the misuse and appropriation of church wealth derived its power from yet wider concerns. In the canons of the councils of fifth- and sixth-century Gaul we can see the emergence of a distinctive discourse that linked the integrity of church property to the perpetual rights of the poor. Those who robbed the church of its lands— both those who directly appropriated church property and those who held back bequests made to the church by members of their family— were deemed to be nothing less than *necatores pauperum*, "murderers of the poor." They were solemnly cursed. At the council of Tours in 567 bishops and their clergy were urged to gather together so as to chant the solemn malediction of Psalm 108 in unison against such defaulters: Because he did not remember to show mercy but persecuted the poor and needy and sought to kill the broken hearted (Psalm 108 [109]: 15). Everyone knew who the broken hearted were. They were not the poor gathered in the courtyard of the church but the bishop and his clergy whose rights (exercised on behalf of the poor) had been flouted."

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Mike Daniels | 3/5/2014 - 5:43pm

My impoverished New York Irish ancestors felt this beautiful church was a good investment in the 19th Century. This church was built by poor people! Yes we need food for our bodies; but we need food for our souls too. How many lost souls have entered the doors of St. Patrick's and had this inspired space lift them up? It has happened for me each time I visit my father's home town. The money being spent on this renovation isn't being flushed down a toilet. This money is providing thousands of dignified jobs. The greatest social welfare program ever devised was ... a job! Please stop your tragically misdirected whining.

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Bill Mazzella | 3/5/2014 - 6:25pm

Mike, maybe you can read my post instead of prejudging it.

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Bill Mazzella | 3/10/2014 - 2:35pm

It is untrue that the Original building of St Patrick was mainly supported by poor people. Here again is Peter Brown:

"Hence the double aspect of the Christianity that had emerged in the Latin West in the crucial period between 370 and 400 AD. A new institution had become prominent in a society that knew what it was to give. Its upper classes had always valued the exhilarating "rush" associated with giving to an esteemed public cause, of which civic euergetism was the most spectacular and the most certain of acclaim. Great opportunities for giving now opened up in the relatively new Christian churches . But how would these traditions of highly personalized display impinge on a group that had hitherto been notable for its capacity for collective action? This was a real dilemma. Ideally, giving was open to all Christians. But this was a myth. It was no more true in the fourth century than was the nineteenth-century myth that the great Catholic Cathedral of Saint Patrick's in Manhattan was built "through the pennies of Irish chambermaids." (In reality, the first building of Saint Patrick's was made possible through a campaign by which the bishop approached a hundred leading figures for \$ 1,000 each.) 44 Furthermore, what sociologists of modern religion call "skewness" appears to be an iron law in religious giving: 20 percent of the congregation usually contribute 80 percent of the funds of the religious community that they support.

Brown, Peter (2012-09-02). *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (p. 87). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

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Robert Koch | 3/13/2014 - 10:33pm

I think it is important to maintain such a magnificent church as St. Patrick's. We will always have the poor with us. Thank you Cardinal Dolan for completing such a needed restoration.

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