

ST. PETER'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

A MIGHTY RESTORATION IN COLUMBIA

BY MARGARET N. O'SHEA

The oaken pews at St. Peter's Catholic Church may be the best place in Columbia to watch the quiet drama of day drawing down.

It begins with a shimmer that lightly glances through the sanctuary, across the marble altar and down the aisle, then builds to brilliance. The setting sun brightens gold leaf detail atop white columns and intensifies rich colors of stained glass as if the greatest director of them all has ordered it: "Lights . . . camera. . . Be still and know that I am God."

Faith is not a requirement to appreciate St. Peter's, however, or to understand why one of its lay ministries is to guide tours for believers and nonbelievers alike. The historic church is an artistic treasure anytime. Its renovation, completed in 2001, skillfully blended pieces of the past with new details, among them a colorful Tree of Life at the center of the vaulted ceiling and a grapevine, hand-painted in gold leaf, that stretches 277 feet around the sanctuary. It is inspired by Scripture: "I am the vine and ye are the branches." The pattern is repeated on the floor with laser-cut pieces of mahogany, walnut and maple inlaid one by one.

It would have been whimsical to say that working on the church caused at least one Christian to spend hours on his knees, but Columbia artist Christian Thee did not do the floor. Instead, the project uplifted him—literally, on scaffolding so immense that construction workers called it "the dance floor." Thee painted the grapevine frieze high on the wall and gilded ornate capitals on the columns. He also directed three other artists—Glenda Keyes, Marianne Havens and Bruce Bahr—painting of the Tree of Life medallion and 14 carved Stations of the Cross depicting the story of Christ's crucifixion.

Internationally known, Thee has designed theater sets in New York and painted for the rich and famous, including the Queen of England, but St.



Peter's Church in his own hometown was his largest job ever and one of the most challenging. The grapevine and leaves were a repeating pattern, and "to focus on repeating a pattern, you can't think about anything else."

Not a fan of organized religions, Thee says he doesn't like "them tampering with my faith in God." But he was deeply moved by the renovation of St. Peter's, which was a resurrection of sorts for the Gothic-style church. He felt that most strongly the day he touched a damp paper towel to a stained glass window and saw its brighter beauty beneath decades of candle soot.

Later in the project women of the parish braved the scaffolding to clean all 32 of the stained glass windows in the church, a small cost cutter in the \$1-million renovation. The windows are only part of the story of how the grand old sanctuary was brought back to new life, however.



The exterior of St. Peter's Catholic Church (next page) is a Columbia landmark, while the sanctuary (left) is a study in splendor. Restoration has been accomplished in many phases, culminating in 2001.

House original design but not added at construction. He created a Gothic design for St. Peter's Church, which was elaborately furnished with three marble altars, the main one with a bas-relief of the Last Supper; large carved Stations of the Cross; a 10.5-rank pipe organ; and stained glass windows, some of which were for a century believed to have come from Tiffany. (It's now known they did not, but appear to have been made by craftsmen with some connection to Tiffany.) When the \$60,506.24 construction cost was paid off in 1909, the church was consecrated.

"Now we dedicate churches, but back then we consecrated," explains Msgr. Leigh Lehocky, St. Peter's present pastor. "Consecration means a free gift to the Lord. There could be no debt."

In 1966, amid major changes in the Catholic Church worldwide, including the celebration of Mass in native tongues instead of Latin, St. Peter's needed repairs and, some believed, a modern makeover consistent with new liturgical practices. The cosmetic changes during the pastorate of Msgr. William Croghan were met with mixed feelings divided between embracing the contemporary and missing the traditional. It reflected a dichotomy between liberal and conservative Catholics in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

Among the conservatives, Msgr. Croghan was often remembered more for "what he did to the church" than for his focus on education, community service, racial equality, justice and peace, as well as ecumenical and intellectual growth.

The carved Stations of the Cross, which had been painted in lifelike colors in the 1920s, were repainted white as they'd originally been. Two of the stained glass windows behind the altar were deemed distractions from it, and those were covered up. The oak pews were antiqued green. Three altars, including the main altar with its marble bas-relief, were removed, as was the octagonal baptismal font, and replaced with more modern pieces. Familiar statues were removed and replaced with contemporary wooden figures that one elderly parishioner said resembled victims of hanging.

Columbia architect John Boudreaux has been involved with subsequent renovations at St. Peter's since they began in 1982 as a "pay-as-you-go" operation. He said the sanctuary looked white-washed. "It was almost like they'd had a rule [in the 1960s]: 'If it didn't move, paint it white. If it was a pew, antique it green.'" To his eye, almost everything clashed with the building's Gothic architecture.

It starts in 1822, when the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston was formed to serve the Carolinas and Georgia. Bishop John England sent an Irish-born priest to minister to the Irish immigrants who were building the Columbia canal. By 1824, work began on a small brick church in the shape of a Greek cross, designed by architect Robert Mills. It was the first Catholic church in midland and upstate South Carolina. St. Peter's is today on the National Register of Historic Places.

The original church building was badly deteriorated by 1901 and too small for a growing Catholic population. The present 8,100-square-foot building was started in 1906 and completed in late 1908. Where the original church was blessed by the presence of a renowned architect, this one had similar fortune. Frank P. Milburn, a renowned architect of his time, was in Columbia to work on the city's first steel-frame building and the capitol dome, which was part of the State



The pastor, Father Roy Aiken, later to become monsignor, agreed there had to be a way to balance modern liturgy with historical integrity. He had been an assistant pastor at St. Peter's some 35 years earlier and missed the ambience he had loved then. His vision was to repaint, replaster and gild the interior to its original integrity, refurbish the stained glass windows, restore the Stations of the Cross to colors, refinish the pews to their natural oak and install new carpet. Old, unsafe electrical wiring also needed to be replaced.

It took restraint to put first things first. After a storm destroyed the roof of St. Peter's school in 1979, the church had commissioned an engineering study of the church itself. "It said with a 35-mile-per-hour wind, our steeple would be out in Assembly Street," Msgr. Lehocky said. Exterior brick also needed to be sealed to prevent damage inside.

After those jobs were completed, Boudreaux turned his attention to the interior and discovered

the church resembled an archaeological dig in the sense that it had long years of change to uncover. Several layers of carpet and vinyl covered the deteriorated sub-flooring. Boudreaux had hoped to salvage the original gilt, but it had been covered with too many layers of paint.

Over the next three years, as funds became available—then-Father Aiken would never borrow if he didn't have to—St. Peter's began to regain its former character. A new \$154,000, 26-rank pipe organ was installed. A new main altar incorporated the black marble surface from the altar that was installed in 1966. A separate altar incorporated the Last Supper bas-relief from the main altar of the 1906 church. The original baptismal font was returned to the church; it had sat for years in the back yard of some Columbia relatives of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

One of the last additions was an ornamental altar screen. The 20-foot triptych was created by the late Stavros A. Chrysostomides, a Columbia sculptor who called the work a rare opportunity. It is 5,000 pieces of steel, brass and copper forming curved branches of ivy, 200 Roman crosses, and pineapples to represent the church's hospitality. The design was inspired by the 1906 altar's detail.

The late Mike Aun, a Lexington restaurateur and devout Catholic, volunteered to restore lifelike color to the Stations of the Cross.

These cosmetic changes were in place in September 1987 when Pope John Paul II delivered the homily at St. Peter's during his visit to Columbia for ecumenical dialogue with 26 leaders of other Christian churches. This was the pope's second visit to the United States, and it included eight other cities, all bigger than Columbia and with significantly more Catholics.

Cardinal Bernardin wrote his memories of "a remarkable day indeed" in *The Chicago Catholic*:

"The Bishop of Rome—often referred to as the anti-Christ by many in the past (and even today by a few)—had visited a city in the Bible Belt.

(continued on Page 10)

KEEPER OF AN HISTORIC CHURCH LEGACY

Msgr. Leigh Lehocky is more than pastor at St. Peter's Catholic Church. He is a resident historian of sorts who doesn't need notes to tell the story of the 184-year-old parish.

One of his favorites is about the feisty Ursuline nun who "gave a piece of her mind" to Gen. Sherman after her school was destroyed the night Columbia was burned. Sister Baptista Lynch had written the Union general, who had a relative in an Ursuline school in the North, asking him to bypass the school if he did damage in Columbia. He promised he would. But when Yankees torched the town, the convent and school were not spared. The nuns shepherded children into the cemetery behind the church, where they slept on graves and flat tombstones.

Sherman did more than apologize. The Hampton-Preston mansion, which he had commandeered as temporary headquarters, became a convent and school when his troops left and remained so until 1885.

The only church records to survive the burning of Columbia were those sent to the Ursuline mother house in Kentucky.

Sister Baptista Lynch is buried in St. Peter's churchyard, not far from some of the first Irish-born priests to serve the parish and from the architect of the State House, John R. Niernsee. Had she not confronted Sherman, it's possible that St. Peter's school today would not be South Carolina's oldest Catholic school in continuous operation, Lehocky said.

Father Jeremiah O'Connell, pastor from 1848 to 1871, first invited the Ursuline sisters to open a school in Columbia. The order no longer operates the school at St. Peter's, but it is directly descended from the one they started and has never closed—even when a storm demolished the roof in 1979. From then until a new school building was erected in 1992, classes continued in other places.

School children and lifelong parishioners have helped keep history alive at St. Peter's. One story that has fascinated several generations of children is that there is a body buried under the church.

Not really all the way under, but inside it. If you ever have walked into the church through the vestibule, you have passed the burial place of Father Thomas J. Hegarty, pastor from 1895 to 1925. It is in a memorial alcove to the left, covered with an engraved granite slab commemorating his 30 years at St. Peter's. During his tenure, the present church was conceived, built and paid for. When he died in 1931, several years after resigning in ill health, his body was returned to the place he loved most.

A history of the church published in 1990 suggests his funeral was an ecumenical event because he was recognized in Columbia by people of all faiths as a good man. No doubt he would be pleased that St. Peter's is known for fostering ecumenical bonds and hosting ecumenical events to this day.

What fascinates Lehocky as much as anything else is that the church he now pastors is the beginning point of every other Catholic parish in three-quarters of South Carolina. There is only one started by St. Peter's that does not exist today. A picture of the little chapel is among several of historical significance hanging in the hall outside his office in the parish center.

St. Patrick's in Columbia's Olympia Mill village was the earliest known Catholic church in any southern textile community. The building was a cookie-cutter design being used in the 1930s for small Catholic chapels across the United States, Lehocky said. Mill workers who lived in the village had no way to get to St. Peter's but walk, and the little chapel was built to serve those who were Catholic. It might have been the reason some became Catholic. Mass was celebrated there every Sunday from 1939 to 1974. By then most mill workers who still lived in the village had transportation, and there were several Catholic churches in Columbia. The little chapel has since then been used by several small congregations of various faiths.—*MNO*



Msgr. Leigh Lehocky discusses one of the Stations of the Cross with a tour group.

PHOTO BY KENNETH B.M. HEADLEY

(continued from Page 8)

“Some had predicted that he might not be well received, and there were a few protesters. But a poll prior to the visit indicated that 97 percent of the people welcomed the pope. And welcome him they did!

“I was very proud of Columbia.”

It was a nostalgic event for the cardinal, who accompanied the pope into St. Peter’s that day. Bernardin was born not far from the church, was baptized there, made his first confession and communion there, and was confirmed there. He smiled to see the white marble baptismal font back in the church with his family name engraved on it, and wondered if people thought it had anything to do with him, since he was an archbishop by then.

It didn’t. A cousin had gotten it restored for the church. Something a lot bigger is named for the Chicago archbishop now—St. Peter’s new parish life building is the Cardinal Bernardin Center. With its addition, St. Peter’s church, school, cemetery, gardens and parking area fill a city block bordered by Assembly, Hampton, Taylor and Park streets. It is a downtown landmark that architect Boudreaux calls “a statement of faith a mile long.”

He is Catholic, and while not a member of St. Peter’s, he has had a long association with its expansion and with its people. His firm did the 1982-85 renovations and designed a new parish school in 1992, matching its exterior to the church. Completing the long-term interior renovation in 2000-2001 was a personal mission to be true to the once elegant building.

He hired liturgical consultants from Chicago to be sure every detail honored both history and liturgy, and working with Tyler Construction of Columbia assembled a team of interior designers, engineers, artists and other specialized craftsmen like John DeZinna, the Charleston woodworker who created the design on the floor. (Christian Thee is often mistakenly credited by people who know what he’s famous for—*trompe l’oeil*, art that deceives the eye. He could, they figure, make it look like what it really is.)

Individual tiles in the narthex—the area some churches call a vestibule—had to be

hand-laid to create the floor design. Custom moldings had to be crafted along with other special carpentry. There was wrought iron railing to be reworked and ancient plaster restoration to do.

Tyler vice president Rich Spicer found the renovation immensely satisfying, partly because of the teamwork. “Everybody who worked on the project took real pride in it.” The end result is magnificent.

The renovation included new liturgical furnishings of marble. A new tabernacle, where Eucharistic bread and wine are kept, is set against the ornate altar screen installed in the prior renovation. It invites those who slip into the church at quiet times to kneel and pray or adore the elements of Holy Communion.

The old baptismal font is near the entrance of the church with a new immersion baptismal pool that is used for adult converts who have never been baptized. When not in use, it is hidden by an ornate wooden cover. That feature surprises many who think Catholics are sprinklers only, but St. Peter’s is one of many Catholic churches that offer partial immersion at Easter when converts are welcomed into the faith.

The overall effect provides appropriate space for modern worship while doing justice to the Gothic church and its history, Msgr. Lehocky said.

He is yet another pastor with prior ties to St. Peter’s. He attended the church’s school for the three years his family lived in the parish, and early in his priesthood he was an associate pastor. So much has changed, and yet so much remains, he said.

The fact that so many people are drawn to the church just to see it creates opportunities to demonstrate its legendary hospitality, to tell its stories and to expand its presence in the community. St. Peter’s is at the forefront in feeding the hungry, helping those in need and promoting interfaith cooperation.

At least one nonmember has a confession. Charles Brooks, a Catholic, lives in Columbia but not in St. Peter’s parish. Yet, it is where he attends Mass every day. “It lifts me up to be there.” ❖

Veteran journalist Margaret N. O’Shea is organist at Our Lady of the Hills Catholic Church, which started as a mission of St. Peter’s. She lives in Columbia.

TYLER

CONSTRUCTION GROUP

GENERAL CONTRACTORS

www.tyler-construction.com

This article is sponsored in part by:

- * **Tyler Construction Company, Inc.**, Columbia
- * **Younginer Engineered Products**, Columbia
- * **Columbia Cooling & Heating Company, Inc.**, Columbia
- * **Mike & Stephanie McCabe**, Columbia
- * **Emily Hero**, Blythewood
- * **Dr. William & Dianne Neglia**, Columbia
- * **Pat & Mary Callahan**, Columbia
- * **Leroy & Dorothy Kievlan**, Columbia
- * **Mr. & Mrs. J. Patrick Toal**, Columbia