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Faith

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A statue of St. Martin of Tours giving away part of his cloak stands under a large mural of Christ on his throne in the gathering space at St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church in Vicksburg.



Building boom sweeps Catholic diocese

By Chris Meehan
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Step inside St. Martin of Tours, the recently constructed, \$3.9 million Catholic church in Vicksburg.

First, let your eyes follow the sweeping wooden beams to the vaulted ceiling.

Pause a moment to watch sunlight stream through the windows of the cupola, high above the church floor.

Then, moving deeper into the nave, check out the Stations of the Cross hanging from the walls. They were painted in Spain.

But that isn't all.

Spend a little time examining the 12 pillars — one for each apostle — holding up the carved altar.

When you're done with that, step outside the sanctuary into the large gathering space. There you can see — painted on the wall by an artist from Traverse City — a large mural of the risen Christ

'We wanted it to accommodate people and their

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That didn't happen everywhere, Reilly said. Still, there were instances "of pastors turning this around and moving that and doing what they thought the council wanted them to do."

Thankfully, he said, the movement in recent years has been to look at the whole worship space and to build churches that honor the past at the same time they incorporate appropriate contemporary designs, materials and symbols.

Several major church projects in the Kalamazoo area — many that were recently completed and one that was launched at a special service Sunday — reflect this changing emphasis.

In each case, the local churches have committed themselves to blending some of the best of the old with aspects of the new.

"The word 'catholic' means universal," said Reilly. "Each church has to look at its culture, its needs, its goals and its mission ... and then create a space that conforms to the requirements of the Catholic Church."

Relevance and reverence

Duncan Stroik, a professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, says there remains a healthy debate on how to renovate Catholic churches.

While the trend is toward the traditional, there remain those who seek relevance over reverence. "We have the experience of the past 40 years, which in some cases means that parishes 'get up with the times' by a church in the round, while for other pastors and parishes it means restoring the sense of transcendent," he said.

To make it simplistic, he said, the approaches might be distinguished as church building that emphasizes community and church building that emphasizes the worship of God.

"The two different solutions tend to give alternative interpretations of religion, worship, the church building and God," he said.

Given the choice, he said, more and more Catholics "prefer history, symmetry, beauty and hierarchy in their buildings."



CHRIS MEEHAN / GAZETTE

Religious symbols are incorporated throughout the architecture at St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church.



Construction of a new church at St. Martin of Tours in Vicksburg tied older buildings in with the new.

Construction boom

Church-construction projects that have been undertaken in the past two or three years in the Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo include a new, \$3.2 million church at St. John's in Albion; a new \$1.2 million church at St. Cyril and Methodius in Gun Lake; a nearly \$900,000 renovation of St. Joseph Church in Kalamazoo, and St. Martin of Tours in Vicksburg.

Churches in Decatur, Three Rivers and South Haven have also undertaken renovation projects. Meanwhile, St. Thomas More Student Parish

in Kalamazoo, St. Catherine of Siena in Portage and St. Margaret's in Otsego have big plans on the books.

Just last weekend, St. Tom's held a special festival mass to kick off a capital campaign for a new, \$3.8 million church.

"There has been a significant increase recently in renovations and new construction," Reilly said.

Reilly said he suspects low interest rates and construction costs have played a role in sparking so much building.

Entering the mystery

Looking at all of the projects,

Reilly said each has its own character.

The new church in Gun Lake, for example, is a simple country structure that offers a spacious interior. The old church building is tied to the new via a common entryway.

St. John's in Albion also links the old with the new by placing statues and stained glass from the old church in the entry to the new one, said Reilly.

In Vicksburg, the former sanctuary has been transformed into a community hall, and an office suite has been built for parish administration.

In addition, a statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, greets visitors on the west end of the church; a statue of his father, Joseph, does the same on the east end. But it is the new sanctuary itself, with its soaring lines, Romanesque arches and crucifix of Christ suspended as if in thin air above the altar, that tells the story.

"We've tried to make it so that you are ushered into the mystery," said Martin. "The mystery that we enter is more profound than anything we can imagine."