

Florence Mourns Art Loss, Discovers Friends

By FATHER JOHN P. DONNELLY

Florence, Italy — (NC) — Two days after flood waters struck this city of art treasures, Vatican experts were at work on the long and difficult process of restoring ancient illuminated manuscripts, rare books and documents.

Father Mario Pinzuti, O.S.B., of the Monte Oliveti monastery, director of the Institute for the Scientific Restoration of Books in Rome, was commissioned by Pope Paul VI to take charge of the rescue operation. Helping him were the institute's assistant, Father Alfredo Colombo, O.S.B., and other monks from Monte Oliveti and the Benedictine monastery at Grottaferrata — all specialists in book restoration.

In the first confused hours after the flood, these experts helped where they could; at the State Archives, the National Library, the Science Museum and wherever else experts were needed. When rescue operations were successfully under way, they concentrated on treasures of special interest to Church art and history.

On their arrival, according to Father Pinzuti, they found the situation desperate. Muddy, oily water, which in some places had reached 20 feet at the height of the flood, was still 10 to 20 inches deep in some of the archives, including those of the cathedral with a unique collection of 58 illuminated choral manuscripts, some dating from the 14th century. Only three of these had escaped injury because they were kept on high missal stands that somehow withstood the fury of the flood waters. Heavy antique cupboards in which the other volumes were stored had been ripped open as if they were made of cardboard.

Volunteers were recruited, mostly from among the teenagers and college students who have shown themselves outstanding in all phases of Florence's rescue and recovery. Among them are colleagues of every nationality, including Americans — most of whom came to Florence to study precisely because of its artistic heritage.

Working in mud sometimes up to their knees, from morning to night, these young men and women have reduced to 15 days work that had been estimated to require two months. This was the job of inserting literally hundreds of thousands of sheets of absorbent paper between the pages of each of the soaked books and manuscripts. Four tons of specially treated paper, sent by the Vatican, were needed. It acts as a protective screen for the painted miniature drawings in the manuscripts, prevents pages from sticking together, and absorbs some of the water.

Before the experts came, however, some volunteers inadvertently caused their own damage in the feverish effort to provide emergency first aid. In some cases, pages of salvaged books were sprinkled with talcum powder to dry them out. Mixed with the soft gypsum used in the composition of the miniature paints, and with the chalky mud, the talcum formed a paste which in effect turned the drying books into bricks. The damage is permanent and these books are virtually lost.

Volunteers made another first aid error by piling rescued volumes in stacks. Since there are elements of sugar and cellulose in the composition of many of the old manuscripts, chemical action with water can produce a swelling and spontaneous combustion similar to the effect produced by the sun



Cardinal Directs Relief Work

Florence, Italy — (RNS) — Wearing high boots like other relief workers, Ermenegildo Cardinal Florit, Archbishop of Florence, directs the gigantic task of rehabilitation following disastrous floods in the Florentine city. The cardinal has been supervising distribution of food, clothes, medicines and other supplies donated from various parts of the world, including the U.S. and the Vatican.

On tightly packed, wet haystacks. The experts had to work fast to prevent fires as the books dried out.

Four truckloads of soaked and muddy volumes from the Florence National Library were taken to the Benedictine Abbey of Santa Maria del Monte at Cesena. They had been under water for three or four days. After being cleaned, these volumes were placed under a book press to squeeze out the dirty

water; then left to dry in a specially equipped drying-room of the abbey workshop. Since there were too many for the abbey to handle, some were sent to specialists in Bologna, or placed in borrowed drying rooms of tobacco factories and automobile-painting shops. The drying process is an urgent one because mildew becomes a serious threat after about 10 days.

The long and painstaking work of restoration will include the repair of centuries-old leather bindings, decorated with gilt ornamentations and miniature paintings, which were at least loosened if not seriously damaged. The process followed will be much the same as that used by the original binders.

The cathedral manuscripts and many other volumes were taken immediately to Rome, where most of the Florence restoration work will be done.

The Church is People

Newark — (NC) — The human side of the Christian unity movement was underscored here by a priest-ecumenist.

In an address to a group of nuns, Jesuit Father David Bowman, first Catholic priest to work in the National Council of Churches in New York, stressed: "We must not forget that the Church is not a building, not an organization, but people."

At a seminar organized by the Newark Archdiocesan Apostolic Committee, the Jesuit asked the nuns: "Have you called up the Baptist minister in your neighborhood lately to invite him and his wife to dinner? Or perhaps the principal of the nearby public school? And if not why not?"

Father Bowman, when asked what steps of an ecumenical nature could be taken without specific authorization, replied

there are many areas, such as personal contacts, where the individual can act for himself or herself.

He said he agreed with the opinion that "when we go to a superior with every problem, we are asking him to take up the burden of our conscience, which may be why we have to wait so long sometime for an answer."

In an interview, Father Bowman discussed his own book with the NCC. He has been working in the faith and order department of the church unity division on a two-year leave of

absence from the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus.

In New York, he lives at Fordham University, "pays his rent" by teaching one class a week.

"My coming to the NCC is actually a proof of the Catholic interest in ecumenism," he said.

ENGAGEMENT TOLD

Mr. and Mrs. Elmer D. Kelley of Pottstown, Pa. have announced the engagement of their daughter, Mary Phyllis to 3rd class petty officer John Lipari, U.S. Navy, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Angelo Lipari of 92 Ferris St.

der the direction of the Monte Oliveti monks. Father Pinzuti has promised Florence that at least some volumes will be returned restored by Easter.

Among the victims of the flood in the cathedral archives were the so-called "Bastardelli," record books of all baptisms performed in the city of Florence from 1300 almost up to the present. In them can be found the names of most of Florence's "greats," including Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and the man after whom America was named, Americo Vespucci. Restoration of these records takes on another important aspect in view of reports that a great part of the city's civil archives were lost. If that is true, the "Bastardelli" may be the only surviving official records of vital statistics for the majority of Florence's population.

Though thorough checks have revealed damage less than was first believed, the figures are still sad. Of the manuscripts, five per cent are completely lost and 30% of the miniature paintings in them destroyed. Thousands of books and documents were severely damaged.

This is only one aspect, of course, of the gigantic blow the floods (Nov. 4) inflicted on Italy's treasures.

Two American experts of Italian art have made preliminary assessments of the damage. Prof. Frederick Hart, head of the art department of Brown University, who served as Allied Military Government officer for fine arts, museums, monuments and archives in the Florence area during the final days of World War II, and Prof. Fred Licht of the art department of Brown University. According to a release of the U.S. Information Service in Rome, these experts found the bulk of damage to art treasures in the city of Florence itself, but noted that "damage to the protective sea walls in Venice threaten the future of that jewel canal city of the Adriatic as well."

This was their consensus of art damage: 413 paintings on canvas, 11 fresco series, 39 individual frescoes, 31 detached frescoes, 14 monuments, 22 individual sculptures, works of marble and terracotta, 22 wood sculptures, 23 illuminated prayer books.

In addition, the USIS report said, "the unique Florence collection of Etruscan art, an important key to the understanding of the rise of the Roman Empire, was turned upside down. Recently found material was swept by flood waters so that archeologists may be unable to determine the dates of the various finds, a grave loss to Etruscology.

"Archives including a unique collection of all Italian newspapers of the past 100 years, and book and manuscript collections dating back to the Middle Ages were covered with mud and soaked in fuel oil from exploding furnaces."

The professors also reported that the film of fuel oil that covered the Florence flood waters has stained several important sculptures of Michelangelo: Bacchus, the Pitti Madonna, Brutus, and the small David.

"The problem of how to cope with the fuel oil stains which cover the walls of palaces and the sides of monuments as well as paintings and sculptures is unique," they said. "It is some-

thing are restorers never before have had to face. . . . The fine columns of the Gondi palace, the masterpiece of Gulliano da Sangallo, are oil soaked to a height of nine feet. It is unknown whether the original appearance of the Sangallo masterpiece ever can be regained."

One of the greatest challenges to the art restorers will be the Donatello Magdalen, a painted and wood sculpture which now has oil stains reaching to the knees of the figure.

Other important art works damaged: Bronzino's Descent into Limbo, Salvati's Deposition From the Cross, Brunelleschi's model of the dome of the Florentine cathedral, and the Florentine baptistry, where according to the USIS report, Ghiberti's Doors of Paradise "banged back and forth in flood waters for hours and where automobiles and tree trunks collided at 40 miles an hour." Five of the panels of this famous work of art fell off the door during the flood, and several of the delicately cast gold-figures were broken.

Most of the art works of the church of Santa Croce were damaged. Water in the church itself rose to 20 feet during the flood. Ten days afterward, fish were still swimming there.

One of the most tragic losses, from the point of view of the history of art at least, was the famous painted crucifix of Cimabue. This forerunner of the Italian art Renaissance was 90% destroyed.



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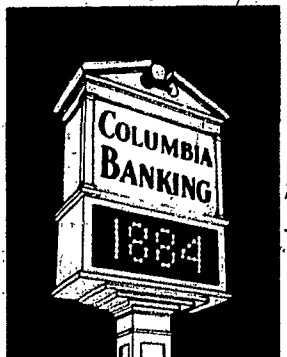
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