

FEATURE

Rochester church exemplifies majestic beauty

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

When Bishop Bernard McQuaid came to bless Rochester's new German church of St. Michael on Michaelmas 1890, he was awe-struck by its devotional beauty. "One is lost in its majesty and carried away by its exquisite taste," he told the congregation.

A century later, St. Michael's Church still "carries one away." The handsome 220-foot steeple still points staunchly to heaven. Why does the message remain so steadfast? Did the planners build into the structure elements guaranteed to inspire?

The creators of any church building naturally number in the thousands. Let us look for an answer at a few key individuals and groups that collaborated to produce St. Michael's. Historical researchers have of late furnished us with new information about the building's craftsmen.

We know a good deal now, for instance, about the architect, Adolphus Druiding (1839-1899). A native of Hannover, Germany, and an alumnus of the royal academies of both Berlin and Munich, Druiding emigrated to America around 1865, working out of St. Louis for 20 years, and then settling in Chicago. An expert in German Gothic Revival architecture and a shrewd businessman, he won many church commissions in both the Midwest and New York state. In Rochester, he designed both St. Michael's Church and the chapel of the former Academy of the Sacred Heart (now Empire State College).

For St. Michael's second and final church, Druiding designed an all-stone structure in German Neo-Gothic. Spacious in dimensions (to accommodate a congregation of 1,100), it would measure 177 feet in length, 92 feet in width at the transepts, and 62 feet in height under the 96-foot ridge pole. The estimated price, \$150,000, would rank it among the more costly of this architect's conceptions.

There were certainly elements of a formula in Druiding's plans. Size and spaciousness do make for "majesty." So does Gothic verticality, of which Adolphus was a master. Count the lines and forms that point heavenward: towers and turrets, columns and columnettes, pointed gables, arches, vaults and windows. Here geometry, confirming doctrine, commands you to "lift up your hearts!"

Two Rochester firms were entrusted with the stonework. Whitmore, Rauber and Vicinus supplied the brown Medina sandstone for the basement and grey Lockport sandstone for the upper part. They likewise furnished the 10 slender columns of polished granite that support the nave walls. The Hiram H. Edgerton Company, founded by Rochester's future mayor (1848-1922), laid the stone. It was high-quality workmanship.

Rochesterian Joseph May was awarded the carpentry contract. Much of his team's work is hidden behind the groined vaulting of the false ceilings. Proofs of their skill are the great brackets that support the choir loft and the twin staircases that spiral upward in the center vestibule.

An out-of-state sculptor, name unknown, probably produced the colossal copper statue of St. Michael above the main entrance. Two Rochester sculptors were responsible for most of the work inside. One was Frank Pedeville (1869-1927). Born in the Austrian Tyrol, he learned his craft in Munich, Frankfurt-am-Main, and Vienna, and then came to America and to Rochester in 1892. Pedeville built many Neo-Gothic altars in western New York. It is not known just which carvings in St. Michael's are his. The other Rochester sculptor was Anton Halstrick (1858-1910). A native of Germany, affiliated for some years with the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, he established his studio in Rochester in 1883. Halstrick executed the elaborate main altar and Communion rail of St. Michael's, splendidly wrought in varnished oak and bright polychrome.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Three views of St. Michael's Church, Rochester: above, the "Nativity" stained glass window; upper right, one of the twin staircases in the center vestibule; lower right, great brackets that support the choir loft.

In the mid-1980s, to provide a free-standing altar facing the people, the table of Halstrick's high altar was detached from its reredos and moved forward. The designer, Patrick Keating, a local student of liturgical art, was careful to relocate the altar table so that, when viewed from the main entrance, both table and reredos still seem to be united.

Stained glass windows certainly hallow a building. They block out the images of the outer world and replace them with spiritual visions. Like most Catholic parishes of its time, St. Michael's chose handsome pictorial windows of the Germanic school. The Tiroler Glasmalerei Anstalt (Tyrolean Stained Glass Institute), located at Innsbruck, Austria, produced the church's 10 mighty nave windows and five sanctuary windows. Two of the nave windows on Bible subjects have a special local significance. "Daniel in the Lions' Den" was to take first prize at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. In the window on "The Nativity," the face of one of the shepherds is that of St. Michael's pastor, Father Fridolin Pascalar (1841-1896); and the face of the kneeling Wise Man is that of Bishop Bernard McQuaid.

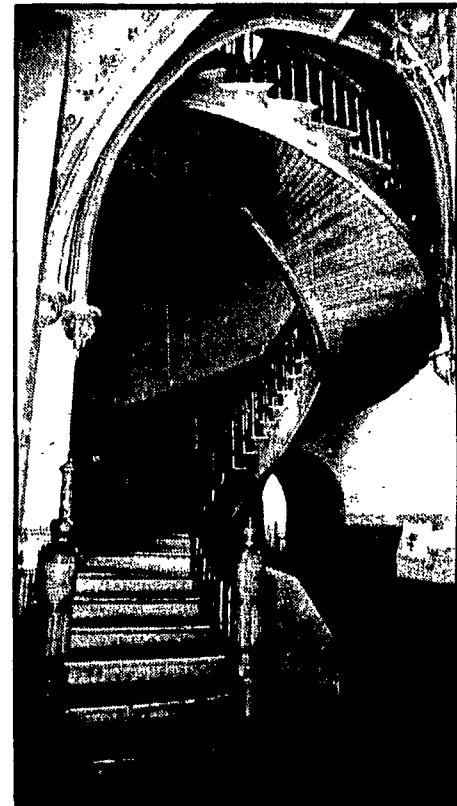
In 1903 the church added a trio of new features. The four-faced tower clock by Howard of Boston was perhaps a mere convenience. Not so the carillon of 13 bells cast by McShane of Baltimore, nor the new organ built by J.W. Steere and Son of Springfield, Mass. These, like the drum and trumpet, harp and cymbals of the Temple in Jerusalem, were instruments of sacred praise. The organ, originally with two manuals and 33 stops, would be augmented in 1955 by Tellers of Erie, Pa. To this day, the organ resounds mightily in this church of peerless acoustics.

Architect and craftsmen did indeed use certain devices to highlight the sacredness of this house of God, and the pastor and people, as its principal creators, would have expected them to. In his sermon on Sept. 29, 1890, Bishop McQuaid had extolled the enthusiastic leadership of Wuerttemberger Pascalar, and the wholehearted response of every man, woman and child in the parish. Their brawn and thrift had provided some \$200,000 (1890 value) to pay for this awe-inspiring shrine. By 1999 the cost of replacement had risen to at least \$8.5 million at present-day value.

On March 14, Bishop Matthew H. Clark will preside at a Mass commemorating the 125th anniversary of the foundation of St. Michael's congregation (1874). The magnificent building will once more thrill those who take part. Yet, it is now suffering much from wear and tear. The four-

faceted clock has stopped. The chime of bells can no longer be played electrically. Worst of all, a serious leak in the roof will take \$300,000 to remedy. Who will cover this expense and similar expenses of the future? Today's parishioners, mostly Hispanic, yield to none in their admiration of Druiding's St. Michael's; but they are simply unable to keep mending it indefinitely.

St. Michael's is arguably the finest church ever raised in the Diocese of Rochester. How long will it survive into the third millennium?



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