

Renovation blends tradition, current needs

It was a total delight to celebrate the Rite of Rededication of their church on Sunday with the people of St. Ambrose Parish, Rochester. The assembly was all that you would hope it would be at a liturgy of that kind. Depending on the moment within the flow of that beautiful ritual, the people, young and old, kept prayerful silence, burst into song, or greeted one another in peaceful affection. From beginning to end I knew that I was celebrating with an assembly very much alive to God's presence and activity in their lives. They seemed especially attentive to that reality in word, sacrament and in one another. It was beautiful to experience that. I know that is true for me and, from all that I observed, I think I can say the same for all present.

Delighted as I was at the experience, I was not surprised by it. I knew that the people of the parish had worked at the renewal of their worship space for a considerable amount of time. They approached the work in a spirit of faith. They rooted their decisions in the lasting values of the church's rich liturgical tradition. They faithfully observed the church's current norms governing such matters. In addition to those guiding principles, the parish — under the leadership of Father Michael Schramel — committed itself to a process that both elicited as much input from members of the parish as reasonably possible and kept the parish informed about every step along the way. My understanding is that the richness of this process of communication proved to be critical to the peace of the process and its happy completion.

There is another very significant factor in the story. To their commitment to making

along
the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

their place of worship more apt and beautiful than ever, the parish added another commitment. That was to honor those who had gone before them at St. Ambrose by using, wherever and as much as possible, the materials and artifacts that were so precious to them for so many years. Among the many examples of their success in this regard I mention the way they folded the marble from the old church into the new. In ways like that, the community honors the past even as they move into the future.

But there are also some differences based on the church's ongoing reflection on its self-understanding, its liturgical and sacramental life, how we relate to one another in the church. For example, the location and prominence of the baptismal font at the renewed St. Ambrose is a powerful symbol of the meaning of that great sacrament of initiation. That font, as should all of our great symbols, teaches without speaking — of new life, of life's purpose, of our relationship to Christ and to one another. A second example is the great gathering area just inside the main doors of the church. The space itself suggests the reality that we are a community by God's

will, not by social convention. The presence of the people in that space and their use of it before and after the liturgy were an impressive embodiment and reminder of that truth.

I remember as I write these words that, during my 22 years as your bishop, a great number of the parishes in our diocese have engaged in the exciting and often challenging work of renewing their churches. They, like the people of St. Ambrose, did so because they realize that the great symbols of our liturgical life not only express the faith but teach it as well. They know that — because these symbols teach — their location, relative size and appropriateness are vitally important to us all. And they are aware that the same is true because such symbols express our understanding.

Consider the ways since the Second Vatican Council in which our renewed understanding of our faith has affected our symbols and pastoral practice — in ecumenical and interfaith affairs, in the Sacraments of Initiation, in our liturgical life and many others.

Every one of the parishes I refer to has its own story of renewal and renovation. They could all tell us what worked and what didn't work, what they would do again in exactly the same way, what they would avoid at all costs. And we do try to learn from all of those stories.

Whatever the ups and downs of the experience in those many communities, I think it fair to say that the vast majority of people in the vast majority of those parishes rejoice in the work they did and judge that it strengthened them in faith. I am sure the people of St. Ambrose will tell you that.

Peace to all.



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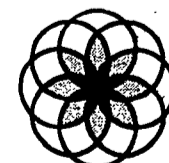
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