

# A CHURCH FOR THE UNIVERSITY

St. Thomas More

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St. Thomas More Church, Queens, New York.

Reverend Michael J. Carroll, C.M.

Martin A. De Sapio, architect.

**W**e waited fifty years for a church at the Queens campus of St. John's University in New York. Founded in Brooklyn in 1870, the university had outgrown its original site by the mid-1950s and began moving to another site, a former golf course in Queens. Campus architectural plans from 1954 originally included a church, but limited resources meant that more pressing academic needs came first. The community had a place of worship, but it was a small, cave-like chapel with a very low ceiling—cozy and intimate, but not bold enough to call students and faculty forth to serve a world in need.

Still, the people prayed and hoped and dreamed. A breakthrough moment occurred decades later when two benefactors offered to share their dream and their resources with the university. Experience had taught them that the ability to stand firm amid the storms and stresses of life comes from having taproots in faith nourished by the Eucharist. They wanted such strength for future generations of St. John's students and dreamed of a church building that would be open and inviting, drawing students to its center.

In early 1998, that image became one of the guiding principles we (that is, the members of the building committee) used in designing and eventually building a church for the university. Alongside it was the image of our parishioners.

## Worship Spaces for Young People

St. John's University is home to 20,000 students, 75 percent of whom are undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 24. At that age and stage of development, life tends to be all about relationships, usually peer relationships! With only a few years to spend at the university, students have little time for a worship space and set of symbols and images to slowly reveal their meanings. This fact, and a resulting concern for visual clarity and immediacy, informed our decisions about the design. We selected symbols and images, hoping that they would speak to young adults and relate to them at their stage of religious development. We wanted the church to be alive, filled with light and color. And since we are a university community, we decided to emphasize imagery showing Jesus as teacher. Trusting that alumni and benefactors would be willing and eager to assist us financially, we also decided to have art specially designed.

Collaboration was key. Even before hiring an architect, we invited others to join us in developing the project's scope. We met with groups of campus ministers and parishioners to discuss their dreams for using the church. We made trips to recently constructed churches; studied ecclesial documents and other relevant literature; contacted other universities that had recently built churches; developed a list of architects and artists to interview; and developed a planning calendar. Opportunities for collaboration persisted throughout the project.

## Working with the Architect

After interviewing six architectural firms, each of which had built fine churches, we selected the firm of Martin A. De Sapio, AIA. The firm had designed several churches, some of which we visited; each one impressed us for its fidelity to the principles of Vatican Council II and because it looked as though it belonged to its neighborhood. The churches, taken as a group, were quite distinct, which led us to think that the architects would collaborate with us, not arrive at the first meeting with a complete design of what our church should be.

We wrote a document for the architects, "The Shape of Worship," weaving together elements from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, our collective experiences with the redesign of liturgical spaces, and the results of our focus groups on how the church would be used. The document included a few illustrations, which might have conveyed more to the architects than did the text.



We recommended a large narthex (gathering space), not just for fellowship or overflow situations, but particularly to allow students time and space to make a transition from the hectic world outside the church. We also envisioned a central-plan church to emphasize the people of God at prayer, and a separate Blessed Sacrament chapel to allow students a place for private prayer virtually round-the-clock.

While our greatest concern remained the church interior, we considered the exterior, ensuring that the church would “look like a church,” fit with a university founded in 1870, and relate well with other campus buildings. We passed all these points along to the architects, then held our breath.

## Behind the Design

When at the outset of the project Bishop Thomas V. Daily granted the university permission to construct a church on campus, he urged us to include a strong Vincentian presence. It gave impetus to a mosaic, encircling the narthex, that illustrates the history of St. Vincent DePaul and his followers down to the present day. Central in the narthex is a hammered bronze baptismal font, on an octagonal rose granite base, with “living” water continually washing over its sides. The interplay between circles and octagons continues within the worship space, on the floor design, for example.

The main worship space is framed by a circular ambulatory surrounding the curved rosewood pews. In the center of the sanctuary stand the octagonal rose granite altar, with its visible reliquary, and a similarly designed ambo. The removable processional cross is inserted into a brass cruciform frame so that the community is never bereft of the cross. The presider’s chair, with a cruciform shape etched in gold, is also emblazoned with the community seal.

Seating capacity in the pews is 400, but expands to 600 with extra seating in the

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*Photos: (p. 10) stained glass designed by Sylvia Nicolas. Jibad N. Nammour, photographer. (p. 11 top) view of the altar from the baptistry, photo credit: www.taylorphoto.com*

Late one night, a campus minister returning to the residence hall noticed that the church lights were on and went to investigate. The church was filled with students praying.



(Top) Exterior view of the church, (above) baptismal font with skylight. The mosaics recount the revelation of the Miraculous Medal to St. Catherine Labouré and show a procession of Vincentian saints. Photo credits: [www.taylorphoto.com](http://www.taylorphoto.com)

ambulatory. We solved physical accessibility issues by not raising the sanctuary above ground level. With only six rows of pews, sightlines are adequate, but if not, a predella could be added. The sanctuary is set off by color and polish, which the community has respected naturally without prior instruction.

High above the central worship space are four large stained glass windows designed by Sylvia Nicolas. We selected her as our principal artist because her vivid classical images are both contemporary and traditional, and her generous use of transparent glass floods the space with light. Each Gospel is depicted in four quadrants: the Gospel writer with his traditional symbol; Jesus the teacher as best illustrated in that Gospel; and two key teaching moments from the Gospel that we thought would have special relevance to our students' lives.

### Three Shrines

The lower stained glass windows surrounding the ambulatory illustrate fifteen key stories from Old and New Testaments. Here we invited the broader community to participate in identifying which scenes would be depicted. Our goal was never to please everyone. Rather we wanted to look far outside ourselves to discover which biblical stories or scenes have supported our people on their faith journey. In determining which saints would be represented in the Blessed Sacrament chapel, we asked students and parishioners which saints' lives and missions have served as models for them. In both cases the stories people shared have been very moving. Rather than adding new ideas they have confirmed most of our initial plans.

There are three shrines within the body of the church. The statue of St. Thomas More, sculpted by David Wanner, shows More making his stand against the king; he has defiantly yanked the chain of office from his neck and holds it at his side.

Wanner's statue in the Marian shrine we have named "Mary, Seat of Wisdom." Seated with the Scriptures open before her, she appears as an older woman. Since many of our students have told of extraordinarily rich relationships with their own grandparents, we wanted students to encounter a mature Mary.

The third shrine places our church in its unique moment in history. During the 9/11 attacks St. John's University lost 75 alumni and more than 50 other family members and associates. We thought it important to dedicate a shrine to their mem-

ory. Designing it was a challenge, but we came up with a powerful design: the shrine is framed by two rough granite walls, reminiscent of the twin towers. Water courses down them gently. In the center is a steel panel. Etched at the top are words from the American spiritual "O Healing River": "Send down your water . . . wash the blood off of the land." Beneath it is a cross crafted by one of the iron workers at the World Trade Center (a neighbor who heard that we were building a church and thought we might want the cross), inscribed beneath the cross are words from the Book of Revelation promising that God will make his home among us and "there will be no more weeping, for death will be no more."

Behind this shrine is a simple Reconciliation chapel with a stained glass window depicting the Forgiving Father.

On a direct access with the altar is the octagonal Blessed Sacrament Chapel, with the tabernacle mounted in a rose granite tower, the sanctuary lamp above. Its four stained glass windows, designed by John Calligan, present collages of images: the church faithful, the church suffering, the church triumphant, and the church universal.

### **What We Learned**

We took many risks and experienced many setbacks in the six years it took to move from design to dedication. Ultimately, however, the time itself proved to be a blessing we could never have imagined. So was the collaboration, not just because it enriched the pool of ideas, but because it extended ownership of the project. Although we were always confident that a central-plan church would be best for us, the experience of actually using the church has confirmed that decision.

In a circle there is no front or back; everyone can be part of the celebration at all times. Already this church has shaped our university community in new ways. Here

is just one example. At the end of spring break 2005, three St. John's students were killed in two unrelated traffic accidents; one student was engaging in a humanitarian deed. Late that night a campus minister returning to the residence hall noticed that the church lights were on and went to investigate. The church was filled with students praying. Knowing that these were not the Catholic or even Christian students, he asked why they had come to the church to pray. "We knew it is a holy place to be," they responded.

The dream of a church drawing students to its center has been fulfilled. Throughout the day students can be found there in quiet prayer, drawing strength from God, who is their center.

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