

Change of 'Heart': Sacred Heart Oratory gets makeover

The Dialog: Serving the Catholic community of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore
June 19, 2003, <http://www.cdow.org/dialog.html>

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WILMINGTON

Brother Ronald Giannone's face brightens as he stands beside the new altar in the renovated Sacred Heart Oratory.

"This is a dream for anyone who loves to celebrate Eucharist among the people according to Vatican II," said Brother Ronald, the Capuchin Franciscan priest who heads the Ministry of Caring outreach network.

The portable altar rests on a 25-foot platform that sits at the foot of the original sanctuary in space formerly occupied by pews. Twenty-four chairs — 12 on each side of the altar — provide an intimate setting for daily Mass.

The altar and redesigned sanctuary are part of a year-long, \$900,000 renovation of the 129-year-old Romanesque Revival church at 917 N. Madison St. in Wilmington's west center city area. The Ministry of Caring bought the church in 1996 and renamed it Sacred Heart Oratory and Center of Evangelization; the diocese had closed Sacred Heart Parish that year due to dwindling enrollment and after the Benedictine priests who operated Sacred Heart said they could no longer staff or help finance the parish.

Under Brother Ronald's supervision, workers also restored the church's stained glass, other artwork and woodwork; removed the altar rail; installed recessed lighting, a new



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Brother Ronald Giannone discusses the year-long, \$900,000 renovation of Sacred Heart Oratory in Wilmington.

ceramic tile floor, elevator, and heating and air conditioning system; repointed bricks; and repaired the roof. The extended sanctuary reduced seating from 550 to 350, but Brother Ronald said he plans to add pews to the choir loft.

Money for the renovations came from private donors, Brother Ronald said.

Brother Ronald hopes the oratory (the name for a structure other than a parish church that is used

for prayer and celebration of the Mass) becomes a hub for the area. "The idea is to create evangelization for the people who live in this neighborhood," he said, "[to] bring people into the church, especially those who are unchurched or fallen away."

The main emphasis of the renovation "was to make (the sanctuary) current to the liturgical guidelines for worship space, so that people feel more intimate with the liturgy as it is

taking place," said Tom Higley of Anderson Brown Higley Associates Inc., the Wilmington architectural firm that worked on the project.

Those who haven't been to Sacred Heart since the parish closed might not recognize the 5,000-square-foot church today. It is brighter and airier, with the simplicity of the portable altar juxtaposed against the ornate original architecture. As workers stripped more than a century's worth of paint and stains from the woodwork, cleaned years of accumulated dirt from the stained glass windows, and restored five large paintings plus the Stations of the Cross and other plaster work, "they discovered the inherent richness that had been muted," said Higley.

The work has brought greater attention to features such as the hand-carved images of the four evangelists on the sides of the huge, ornate pulpit, and the Stations of the Cross. Faded sanctuary paintings were "brought back to living color," said Brother Ronald, and the stained-glass windows, made in Austria, now gleam with color and light.

"These stained-glass windows are incredible," Brother Ronald said. "This is the work of craftsmen of the Old World in Europe who took the time and effort to be concerned about every detail."

Next on his list, he said, is to restore the organ, which he says dates to the time of the neighborhood's first German immigrants.

An oak baby grand piano is scheduled to arrive this week.

The church's old confessional is also being updated, and a new face-to-face reconciliation room has been added. Brother Ronald plans to use both frequently. "We want to have regular times in which the sacrament of reconciliation would be available — maybe even Monday through Friday." Mass is celebrated at Sacred Heart at noon Monday through Friday and at 9 a.m. Sunday.

Modern, etched-glass windows are being placed in six doors that enter the sanctuary, Brother Ronald said. They will include etchings of Ss. Francis of Assisi and Clare, founders of the Franciscan orders for men and women.

Another set of doors, between the sanctuary entrance and the outside entrance, feature stained-glass windows with images of Ss. Benedict and Scholastica, founders of the Benedictine congregations of men and women.

"We're not losing the tradition," Brother Ronald said. "It was started for the German immigrants, welcomed the Polish immigrants, survived a changing neighborhood, and has welcomed the community who are presently here (living at Sacred Heart Village, a Ministry of Caring housing complex for low-income retirees). We are continuing that mission, and we are helping and assisting people in the African-American community as well."

One of the sanctuary paintings, of the Blessed



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The newly renovated Sacred Heart Oratory (above) includes a portable altar in space previously occupied by pews, restored stained-glass windows, a new floor and new lighting. The altar rail also was removed. The old interior is shown below at the closing Mass for Sacred Heart Parish in 1996. Sacred Heart Parish was opened in 1874 to serve German immigrants in Wilmington.



Virgin holding an infant Jesus while she gives St. Dominic the rosary and Pope Leo XIII looks on, ties the project together for the Ministry of Caring, Brother Ronald said.

"[Pope John Paul II] made this the year of the

rosary [and] prayer for evangelization of the people. The Ministry of Caring took in its first homeless woman and was created on Oct. 7 — the Feast of the Holy Rosary — in 1977. Now we are beginning another mission of evange-

lization to the people under her patronage of the rosary."

Thinking of how everything seemed to have come together, he added: "It seems like Providence was in every corner, at every angle. You can't go wrong."