

# Reflecting Heaven

## Notes on the OLMC Sanctuary Renovation, Part II

### Part II: The Sanctuary

In the last two weeks, we've explored the progression from the Baptismal font, up the aisle, to the sanctuary. We considered that journey from font to altar as a microcosm of the Christian pilgrimage from the waters of Baptism, through the church, marching steadily toward the sanctuary, that great meeting point of heaven and earth. And the focal point of the sanctuary is the Altar, which we examined last week.

But what exactly IS the sanctuary? The root of the word comes from the Latin "sanctus," or "holy," and the deeper meaning of "holy" is "set apart and consecrated to God." Thus, everything that happens in the sanctuary is on a different plane, both literally and figuratively, from the other activity in the building. We might well get involved in a lively discussion of the Colts' game in the narthex, but never in the sanctuary. Discussing football is not sinful, but on the other hand it is not talk that is "set apart and consecrated" to God, and therefore has no place in the sanctuary. It's that kind of place!

The sanctuary is a raised platform, a few steps above the level of the nave. This has the practical purpose of improving visibility (as we've seen from the lack thereof the past few weeks). In fact, we would have liked to raise the height even more to further improve sight lines, but it wasn't possible without losing pew seating. The raised platform it is also a symbolic separation from the rest of the church, a step closer to heaven, as it were. In our renovation, this "holiness" or "setting apart" will be made more evident by the inscription "*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*" etched on the stair risers leading from nave to sanctuary.



As we climb the steps, we rise nearer to the heavenly realm, where Scripture tells us the angels are singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" before the very throne of God. At every Mass, we "lift up our hearts to the Lord" just before singing these words. It is worth looking at this scene in the Book of Isaiah, when Isaiah has his magnificent vision of the heavenly Sanctuary:

*I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!" At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke.* (Isaiah 6:1-4)

Consider the imagery of this vivid passage. If we truly took to heart our union with the host of heaven when we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," we would indeed make the frame of the house shake! And at Masses with incense, this is why we fill the house with smoke at the elevation of the Body and Blood of the Lord – because it's a precursor of our heavenly worship, a bit of heaven-on-earth! As for the seraphim covering their faces, think of our Adoration Chapel.



Photo Credit: Fr. James Bradley

How else is the sanctuary set apart? Well, there are several ways:

- ❖ *Attire*: Consider the attire worn in the sanctuary; it's hardly the same garb one would wear to Clay Terrace! The priest wears an alb covered by a chasuble. The deacon wears an alb covered by a dalmatic. The servers wear a plain white alb, and the Knights of Our Lady wear cassock and white surplice. Some of our cantors wear albs or choir robes, and in many parishes all the cantors and readers wear albs. Why? The alb (from the Latin "*albus*" or "white") is a plain, white garment. Sound familiar? Think of the white garment presented to the newly baptized. Consider a pure white First Communion dress. It's all about *Baptism*! Those who minister in the sanctuary, the Holy of holies, do so by virtue of their Baptism, the first Sacrament of initiation. Baptism, shown by the alb, is our passport to ministry in the sanctuary. The clergy wear additional garments by virtue of their ordination, but the alb is still the base layer.
- ❖ *Furnishings*. Every Catholic sanctuary must, by Church law, contain at least three fixtures: 1) the Ambo, 2) the Altar of Sacrifice, and 3) the Presider's Chair. Liturgical law allows other items, even the Tabernacle, to be outside the sanctuary. But these three items represent 1) Christ in the Word of God, 2) Christ in the Eucharist, and 3) the authority of the Church in the priest, as a representative of the Bishop, the Pope, and ultimately of Christ Himself. In all these cases, Christ our Lord is symbolized – again, a meeting of heaven and earth in the sanctuary. Incidentally, the placement of the Tabernacle is a separate and complex question, and a full article on that is coming soon!
- ❖ *Materials and colors*. In our renovation, the sanctuary, from top to bottom, will be outfitted with more noble materials than the nave of the church. It is designed to be "set apart" as such a holy focal point should be. The floor will be clad with a fine, beige/white botticino marble, and the entire sanctuary will

be edged by a red marble border. On the back wall, the old floor tile that used to cover the sanctuary backdrop will be replaced by a beautiful, durable surface called "veneer plaster," seamless and with more texture and character. That veneer plaster surface will then carry into the ceiling decking above the sanctuary (thus the metal ribs you've seen on the ceiling the last two weeks). The beautiful, light treatment of that entire area will draw the eye (and the heart) to the sanctuary, and in turn toward heaven.



- ❖ *Gold mosaics*: A stunning new feature of the sanctuary will be three gold mosaic backdrops that will frame the Tabernacle, the Altar, and the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These mosaics share certain characteristics, but each is slightly different, reflecting their various purposes. More detail on them in a future column.
- ❖ *Balance*: A great deal of thought, prayer, and deliberation were given to the placement of the fixtures in the Sanctuary. One of the greatest challenges in this whole process has been the massive center structural beam that looms in the center of the Sanctuary. How would we provide a worthy setting for Altar, Tabernacle, and Ambo, while still having usable room for the priest, servers, and ministers, and space for our beautiful Marian statue – all in proper placement and balance? And could we do something to help that beam disappear into the background? Check next week for answers!