Two Churches, One Vision: Sacred Architecture as a Reflection of Benedictine Values and Liturgical Reform

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Two Churches, One Vision
Sacred Architecture as a Reflection of Benedictine Values and Liturgical Reform

by Katheryn Wethli

Connected by institutional programs and leadership, the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University (“CSBSJU”) community is rooted in Benedictine values that have formed the student curriculum, communal worship, and architecture of the
universities. Jonathan Nash, an associate professor of history at CSBSJU, says in his work “Practicing Benedictine Values to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment,” that “Benedictine values may help instructors and students create inclusive learning environments in which all persons have the opportunity to learn and thrive.” While this article does not intend to comment on the academic curriculum of the institutions, Nash’s work brings to light the Benedictine values’ emphasis on inclusion and transformation, two values reflected in the aesthetically differing architectural designs of Saint John’s Abbey Church and Saint Benedict’s Sacred Heart Chapel. This article presents how the Benedictine values and the liturgical reforms of the mid-twentieth century shaped the clear and simple architectural designs of Saint John’s Abbey Church and Saint Benedict’s Sacred Heart Chapel, which highlight the sacraments and emphasize the worshippers’ active participation. Before examining the architecture, I will first present the history of the two monasteries in relation to the CSBSJU community and briefly explain the monasteries’ role with the Liturgical Movement.

Saint John’s Abbey and Saint Benedict’s Monastery are religious communities of the Benedictine order founded by Saint Benedict of Nursia in 610 A.D; Benedict created a “Rule” for his community that emphasizes prayer, work, study, hospitality, and renewal. Since its founding, the order has flourished, and Benedictine communities have been formed throughout the world. When Germans immigrated to

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3 The Rule of St. Benedict was written by Benedict of Nursia after 529. According to the osb.org, the official website of the Benedictine order, the Rule of Benedict “reflects Benedict’s own long experience as a monk and abbot, and his study of the older monastic tradition which he uses extensively, especially an older text called the Rule of the Master by an anonymous author. The Rule consists of a Prologue and seventy-three chapters, ranging from a few lines to several pages. They provide teaching about the basic monastic virtues of humility, silence, and obedience as well as directives for daily living.” See “The Rule.” OSB DOT ORG. Accessed March 6, 2023. https://osb.org/our-roots/the-rule/.
Minnesota in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they desired to have other Germans who could lead them in prayer in their native language, as there was not a strong presence of German religious in central Minnesota. Thus, the vowed religious came to Minnesota from neighboring towns in Bavaria, answering this call to pray and educate the youth. They founded Saint John’s University in 1857 and Saint Benedict’s College in 1913. As the communities grew with new students and new religious members, they built rooms for schooling and worship. The worship spaces were built in a Romanesque-renaissance style with ornate artwork of angels and saints, reflecting their homeland of Bavaria. With the liturgical reforms brought on by the Liturgical Movement (1920-1950) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the communities rebuilt and renovated their worship spaces.

The communities’ heritage of education and servanthood to the lay people of the surrounding area of central Minnesota is likely one of the reasons for its involvement in the Liturgical Movement. Virgil Michel, a monk at Saint John’s Abbey, was at the forefront of the Liturgical Movement, a movement that challenged ritual traditions and emphasized participation of the laity. His influence and leadership in the movement put Saint John’s Abbey and, to a lesser extent, Saint Benedict’s Monastery at the center of liturgical reform and renewal in the United States. Both Saint John’s Abbey Church and St. Benedict’s Monastery’s Sacred Heart Chapel are monastic spaces that function like parishes, reflecting the liturgical reforms which “mandated alterations in the layout of Catholic churches and re-vitalized an interest in liturgical arts for the new settings.”

Saint John’s Abbey Church is an architectural example of where modern design and liturgical reinvigoration meet, with its clear emphasis on the sacraments and the participation of all people. Designed in the 1950s by Marcel Breuer, the Abbey Church displays a brutalist style dominated by stone and steel architecture. The church’s function centered on what Victoria Young calls a “spiritual axis,” a term she coined “for [the] worshipper’s processional way based on monasticism, liturgical

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4 Victoria M. Young, *Saint John’s Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xvi.
form, and modern design.”5 As the worshipper walks through the front doors of the Abbey Church, they walk under the solid stone Abbey Bell banner, passing from the secular into the sacred. Upon entering the church, the worshipper walks into a room lined with concrete walls and a natural light shining through the ceiling; sitting in the center of the room is a baptismal font reminding the worshipper of their own baptism. From there, the worshipper comes into the worshipping space: a dark room lit by the natural light that shines through the colorful stained-glass windows in the back of the church. The worshipper walks towards the altar, passing confessionals on either side of the church which signal God’s redemptive love received in the sacrament of reconciliation. A sky light shines on the altar, bringing the worshipper to center themself on the Eucharist. The altar is visible from the pews and the stalls, allowing all to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. This entrance into the church is predominately one that only the laity will take as the monks typically enter through the connecting path of the Quadrangle Building of the university campus that leads to their monastery. The church is multi-functional in its use, serving both the monastic brethren and the laity. The lower level of the building has private chapels that accommodate both the laity and the monks, but its dominant use is for the religious brethren to pray and have private daily celebrations of the Eucharist.

Likewise, the Sacred Heart Chapel was renovated in the 1980s by liturgical and design consultant Frank Kacmarcik to reflect the “new awareness of contemporary Benedictine Spirituality.”6 The sacredness of space and environment were key elements in the design of the chapel and its layout. Unlike the newly built Abbey Church, the sisters’ original building from the beginning of the twentieth century remains the foundation of the new church, called the “Gathering Space.” Upon entering the building, one walks into a bright white narthex lined with marble columns and proceeds into the worshipping space. From there,

5 Young, *Saint John’s Abbey Church*, 67.
the worshipper steps into a white chapel with lofty ceilings and simple candelabras that line the Chapel’s walls. The worshipper is first reminded of their baptism as they pass the baptismal font. The altar stands in the center of the worshipping space, visible to all worshippers as they sit in any one of the four sections of pews that surround the altar. This design makes the altar the central focus of the Chapel, emphasizing the centrality of the sacrament of the Eucharist in the Catholic faith. The Gathering Space serves the needs of the community and the laity. It stands as an important symbol of the Christian faith and of the Benedictine heritage and community, as it “is a meeting of old traditions and a new and ever-growing spiritual vitality.” The entrance that the laity uses is separate from the entrance of the sisters. The preservation of some pieces of the old church—including the Italian Siena marble pillars, the base of the baptismal font, and the altar—show the intention of inviting the laity to participate in the Mass and a renewed emphasis on the sacraments which are core to the faith. Additionally, the church works well as a multi-functional space: the top level of the church holds liturgical, social, and educational events; the middle level is an Oratory for the praying of the Divine Office; and the bottom level holds the Monastery’s Archives.

The differing architectural aesthetics of Saint John’s Abbey Church and Saint Benedict’s Sacred Heart Chapel are a response to the call to reform the liturgy and create clear and simple architecture that highlights the sacraments and invites the laity into participation. These churches also represent the Benedictine values of hospitality and community living, fostering an environment for conversation. The architecture of the worshipping spaces provides room for the monastics to grow deeper in their vocation while also creating a space for the laity to encounter the Lord and to be transformed. The churches highlight the call of the vowed religious who came from Bavaria to be teachers and evangelizers of the gospel. The worshipping spaces are multifunctional, creating a space of prayer, dialogue, evangelization, and community. While many people, including this writer, have criticized the renovation and

7 “Sacred Heart Chapel.”
rebuilding of these two churches, saying that they are “ugly” or “look like a spaceship,” my hope is that this article can express to the reader the deep intentionality involved in building these churches. The architecture of Saint John’s Abbey Church and Saint Benedict’s Sacred Heart Chapel is an attempt to allow all people, both vowed religious and the laity, to encounter the Triune God. This is a revolutionary and extraordinary witness to the ministry of Christ!
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