

# Eamon Carroll and the National Shrine

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**W**hen it comes to expressions of faith, brick and mortar have a way of outlasting most other tributes. The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is not only one of the world's largest churches, but a truly unique compilation of religious art, expressing the great variety of belief and devotion of America's Catholics. In a very substantial way, Eamon R. Carroll contributed to the ornamentation of this stunning basilica during its most significant period of adornment, the years of 1957-80.

Even in the early years of the twentieth century, there were plans for some sort of tribute to the national patroness. The design began to take form in detail with the blessing of the foundation stone in 1920. Work proceeded briskly during the 1920's, as contributions flooded in. The building of the Crypt Church outlined the contours of a great structure, but work had to be suspended in spring of 1933 because of the overall lack of funds. It was not until after World War II that the American bishops decided to complete the church, authorizing collections and

sponsorship for the remaining work. Archbishop O'Boyle commissioned the detailed plans for the Great Upper Church in 1951.<sup>1</sup>

Work finally resumed in 1954, the Marian Year, to complete the remainder of the Shrine. But a multitude of serious questions about exterior decoration crowded the architect's desk and mind. Even the best church builders have to admit that they deal with stone, brick, and structural steel, not concepts. This church had to be different. The broad lines of its construction would indeed proclaim the love which millions of Americans felt for Mary. But when it came to *what* those same people believed, the builders knew they needed help from others who understood the richness of Marian heritage.

The principal architect was Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr. of the firm of Maginnis and Walsh and Kennedy, Boston. At his request, Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle assembled an *ad hoc* Iconography Committee to review plans and suggest forms of decoration which expressed the best understandings of Catholics in America. The National Shrine was intended as more than just a believers' act of faith - it had to proclaim that same faith in terms best understood by teachers and scholars.<sup>2</sup>

As artistic consultant, Archbishop O'Boyle selected a seasoned artist, John H. de Rosen, who had designed both murals and stained-glass windows in 1925-37 for the Armenian Catholic Cathedral in Lwow (Poland), as well as the decoration for the Pope's chapel at Castel Gondolfo in 1933. That work made him the first layman to embellish a Pontifical chapel since Michelangelo decorated the Sistine. De Rosen was born in Warsaw in 1891; his father had been court painter to Russian Czars Alexander III and Nicholas II. He served in the French and Polish

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory W. Tucker, *America's Church; The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000, pp.276f.

<sup>2</sup> Washington, D.C.: Archives of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, C-1 (Iconography Committee).

national armies during World War I, then continued his studies in liturgical art. He emigrated to the United States in 1937 and became an American citizen. He taught at Catholic University during the war years (1939-46) while occupying the Chair of Liturgical Art.<sup>3</sup>

Catholic University would provide the other consultants. To head the Iconography Committee, O'Boyle appointed Monsignor Joseph Fenton, editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. He would be assisted by Edward P. Arbez, S.S., a scripture scholar, and Theodore C. Peterson, C.S.P., a dogmatic theologian. These would serve on a voluntary basis. O'Boyle named artist de Rosen to be "Consultant on the Iconography of the National Shrine." O'Boyle authorized that he be paid \$1000 per month for the period between October 1954 and March 1955.<sup>4</sup> At the time, that span of time looked like quite enough to do the job at hand.

Throughout this short period, the Committee members met weekly, and worked mightily to decide the details of the Shrine's exterior. In over 40 separate meetings, they debated and decided the particulars for the front facade, the main entrance, the side porches, the mosaics of the tympanum areas over the doors, and the statues on the upper walls. One practical example of the Committee's work involved the great northern apse beyond the main altar. The architect had originally proposed a large rose window in this space. But after spirited discussion, de Rosen and his colleagues concluded that the window would blind worshipers during the day, and contribute unattractive dead space at night. They suggested a large mosaic instead.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1, "John H. de Rosen" personal resume', and Tucker, p.134.

<sup>4</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1, Letter of 11/4/54.

<sup>5</sup>. Tucker, pp.137-9.

Although the pace of their work had been demanding, nearly everyone involved agreed that the final result represented both pleasing artistry and solid theology. With a sigh of relief, the first Iconography Committee declared its work complete, and disbanded itself in mid-1955.<sup>6</sup>

However it did not take long before architect Kennedy began to realize that the scholars' work in the Shrine was just beginning. The vast interior of the church represented a bare but intricate labyrinth of vaults and domes, together with large and small chapels. Each would need its particular embellishment and accent. The fund-raising requirements of the enterprise encouraged religious orders, together with fraternal and ethnic groups, to "adopt" and sponsor their own particular chapels or sections within the shrine. Although the response was spirited, it was taken for granted that those same patrons would have vastly different visions of what their particular sectors would look like, and how they would express their own proper Marian devotion.

De Rosen felt that there was a compelling need for a guiding vision that would direct the teaching mission of the Shrine. When the entire job was complete, the religious iconography had to present a unified lesson in Marian theology (although in many facets), rather than a chaotic series of impressions, seasoned by popular piety. He believed strongly that the first 18 centuries of Christianity had created a rich corpus of imagery, still useful for teaching. With so many ethnic groups presenting their particular visions and traditions, there was the classic danger of "too many cooks" who might damage the unified ideal. The Committee favored authorizing a handful of first-rate artists to work in relative freedom, but always with the gentle guiding hand of the theologians to direct their work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1, letter of 6/16/55.

<sup>7</sup>. Tucker, pp.139-41.

In order to maintain some semblance of harmony, Eugene Kennedy asked Archbishop O'Boyle to re-activate the Iconography Committee - this time with no end date in sight. It would function as both a friendly resource for planners, and also a cultural watchdog, with a very low profile. Bishop Bryan J. McEntegart, Rector of Catholic University, had suggested that the membership should include the young Marian theologian Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm. In a letter of May 3, 1957, O'Boyle tells McEntegart that the trustees agree that Eamon Carroll should be added, as well as the Shrine Director Thomas J. Grady. Grady had been appointed in 1956, and would shepherd the Shrine through its most crucial phase of growth. He adds that Fenton should re-convene his Committee by October. In another letter of July 3, O'Boyle urges Fenton to act quickly - he knows that Fr. Carroll is at home, because he has just phoned to arrange Mass at the Shrine for July 16. As things turned out, the October deadline proved to be too ambitious, so the Committee re-convened in November 1957, and has not disbanded since. Cardinal O'Boyle also authorized a renewal of the \$1000 per month fee for artist John de Rosen, with no termination date.<sup>8</sup>

As a steady contributor to the work of the Committee, Eamon Carroll had the benefit of not only solid Marian theology, but of his own travels and observations of much of the early Christian art which inspired the Shrine. From frescos in the catacombs, through Constantinian basilicas and Byzantine mosaics, to medieval stained glass and Renaissance oils, Eamon knew first hand what dogmas had been taught, and by what artistic medium. If beauty is the currency of good liturgical art, then bad art also teaches badly. So his efforts to research carefully and choose wisely could translate bit-by-bit into a magnificent structure which was itself a fine lesson in stone and glass.

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<sup>8</sup> NSIC Archives, C-1.

The new Committee was not required to meet as frequently with the architects as the old one had. On an average of one meeting every two months, they would submit suggestions to the Executive Committee which, more often than not, approved them and passed them on to the artisans. With a much longer view, they would be able to delve into their own rich trove of ideas and images, and produce a more unified and systematic result than any other group or party was likely to suggest.

Among their first daunting tasks were decisions about the most appropriate biblical texts and symbols for the great northern apse...where that rose window would have gone. The final result was an awe-inspiring Christ Pantocrator. Since the overall design of the Shrine was Byzantine, it was appropriate to follow the tradition established by such great Greek triumphs in Sicily as Cefalú and Monreale, as well as countless others in Greece and Asia Minor. In the large flanking apses on either side, there would be mosaics of the Woman of Revelation (west), and St. Joseph, Patron of Workers (east). In harmony with the Church's best teachings, the Shrine of Our Lady would still be presented under the auspices of Christ and the Holy Trinity. Plans for chapels representing the Mysteries of the Rosary would fall under the same umbrella.<sup>9</sup> Further down the path, Committee members would make decisions for a variety of vaults and domes, as well as the Blessed Sacrament chapel and the sacristy.<sup>10</sup>

In a report to the Executive Committee (June 19, 1958), Monsignor Grady gives a hint of the massive workload of the Iconography Committee. He reports that they have recently met every week, and hope to finish their current tasks in July. The interior finish is to be buff-colored brick. He describes the mosaics in the three large apses, and adds that the narthex will

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<sup>9</sup> Frank DiFederico, *The Mosaics of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception*, Washington, D.C.: Decatur House Press, 1980, pp.9f.

<sup>10</sup> Tucker, pp.144f.

show scenes related to John the Baptist. The seven domes in the interior ceiling would be: 1) the Triumph of the Lamb, 2) Incarnation, 3) Redemption, 4) Trinity with angels and saints, and 5-7 still to be determined.<sup>11</sup>

Beneath each of those large apses there were plans for a series of saints (as yet unspecified) flanking apsidal chapels, with five small altars, for each of the three groups of Mysteries of the Rosary. Each Mystery was clearly presented in a clear and familiar form. But together with them are figures from the Old Testament which pre-figure the Mysteries...clearly an intricate construction of astute theologians, who spent more than an afternoon on their work. It is no accident that Elijah in his fiery chariot is the pre-figure for the Ascension of Jesus. One of the figures who watches Jesus rise into heaven is a semi-Carmelite, whose scapular is not brown but white, and tied in a knot at that. But the Carmelite connection is there (and the source of the idea is not hard to infer).

Another ironic twist is found in the choice of the saints for the Glorious Mysteries chapel, below the Pantocrator mosaic. The other two chapels were adopted and generously funded by the Jesuits and Franciscans, who selected some of their own fine saints to flank the altars. But the Catholic Daughters of America had donated the central chapel, and were not committed to any favorite saints. So by default, the Iconography Committee chose the figures for that area, people intentionally selected for their humility and privation. They are Gemma Galgani, a lifelong invalid, the beggar Benedict Joseph Labre, country priest John Vianney, Margaret of Cortona, a repentant sinner, monastery doorkeeper Conrad of Parzham, and Zita, a domestic servant. This very public chapel turned out to be a fine instruction on Jesus' statement "The first shall be last, and the last first."

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<sup>11</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1, Iconography Committee report to Executive Committee.

The frantic work to construct and embellish the upper church of the Shrine finally bore fruit on November 20, 1959 on the formal Day of Dedication. Although by no means complete, the imposing church now loomed over the crypt, thanks to the herculean efforts of the past five years. Most of the interior chapels, in fact, were still in the planning stages, and would require another decade to complete. But at least the outer shell of the great upper structure was up and roofed over, and much of the scaffolding was finally removed to make room for pilgrims.<sup>12</sup>

In January of 1960, while these decisions were being finalized, Monsignor Fenton's notes included references to the ill health of Fr. Petersen, and the resignation of Fr. Arbez, due to many other commitments. Archbishop O'Boyle reluctantly accepted the loss of these two fine men, and immediately set to work to find other competent replacements. He wrote to Monsignor Grady to immediately find an outstanding scripture scholar to replace Arbez; he suggests either Patrick W. Skehan, or Roland Murphy, O.Carm. Monsignor Skehan accepted before the end of February, and was welcomed into the Committee.<sup>13</sup>

During the Committee's early years, one powerful element was always the personality of the chair, Monsignor Fenton. His position as professor of Ecclesiology at Catholic University and editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review* made him a formidable figure, who disliked opposition of any kind, and did not tolerate those who might rock the boat. As always, Eamon Carroll came to meetings with reams of notes and armloads of well-marked books, brimming with ideas to share. Fenton often dismissed the contributions of the young zealot, and referred to him as "Boy." On one occasion, he went beyond the bounds of rudeness, and was quickly told to mind his manners, "or else."<sup>14</sup> The offensive behavior was not repeated.

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<sup>12</sup>. Tucker, pp.153-60.

<sup>13</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1, several documents of January & February 1960.

<sup>14</sup>. An unnamed but unimpeachable source, present at the time.

Yet another example of the benefit of the Iconography Committee is the issue of the Joyful Mysteries chapel in the west apse. Originally the Dominicans had been approached as a likely patron, but their vision of the central figure was that of St. Dominic receiving the Rosary from Mary. This would be a clear mismatch for the apse's major mosaic, the Woman of Revelation. So the Dominicans moved their offering to the east side of the nave, where they contributed one major chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary, flanked by two minor chapels of St. Dominic and St. Catherine of Siena, all completed by 1970. The Jesuits then adopted the west apse, and made their own generous endowment.<sup>15</sup>

One source of great personal satisfaction for Fr. Eamon was the completion of the chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in September of 1964. Located in a very prominent place in the west transept, the chapel is a paragon of simple beauty. The central figure is a large statue of Mary and Jesus, both holding the Scapular. Surrounding the center are smaller figures of favorite Carmelite saints, Simon Stock, Teresa of Avila, Andrew Corsini, Mary Magdalene de Pazzi, John of the Cross, and Therese of Lisieux. The white statues are set off against a blue mosaic background. The chapel was formally dedicated in May of the following year.

Beginning in 1965, the Iconography Committee set to work on the Blessed Sacrament chapel, one of the Shrine's most important components. As the special gift of the bishops, priests, and seminarians of the United States, the chapel was to have a Eucharistic motif which departs to some degree from the Shrine's overall Marian theme. Coming at the time that it did, the discussion of the chapel's design was often spirited, as committee members tried to follow the developing Eucharistic theology which was just emerging from the Second Vatican Council.

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<sup>15</sup> Tucker, p.185.

A detailed memo from Monsignor Grady to Eugene Kennedy (dated May 24, 1965) lists several options regarding the facing and number of altars (one or two), and the placement of tabernacle, as well as the usual questions about artistic themes and texts. Later communications indicate that both Fr. Eamon and Monsignor Skehan strongly favored a single altar, facing the people, with the tabernacle under a small dome with skylight. That format was ultimately adopted, although the final plans were not complete until 1968. Several notes from 1967 explore the decorative options of mosaics of Mary holding wheat, the wedding at Cana, an Orante, a Tree of Life, Jesus washing the apostles' feet, and the Manna in the desert.<sup>16</sup>

In the finished version, completed in June, 1970, the tabernacle under the skylight resembles the Ark of the Covenant, with twin angels above it. The mosaic of the dome shows a Crucifixion scene, with 20 people from various times and places standing there, a reference to the teaching of the Mystical Body of Christ. Other mosaics show both the Last Supper, and the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish. And naturally, eucharistic symbols are everywhere.

The pace of the work kept Committee members, and everyone else, quite busy. Although the Upper Church got most of the attention, work also continued on neglected parts of the Crypt. A note in the Executive Committee minutes (dated June 13, 1967) authorized a review of artist's sketches for the Crypt narthex as soon as possible.<sup>17</sup>

The prolonged deliberation over the Blessed Sacrament Chapel highlighted the need for additional minds and voices on the Iconography Committee. One of the early additions was William F. McDonough, who subsequently became director of the Shrine after June 1967, when Thomas Grady was named auxiliary bishop of Chicago. His departure was somewhat

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<sup>16</sup>. NSIC Archives, A-15 (Blessed Sacrament Chapel), various communications from 4/65 through 10/17/67.

<sup>17</sup>. NSIC Archives, B-2 (Executive Committee).

precipitate, forcing many of the Shrine's organizers to scramble to keep services on schedule.

Bishop Grady presided over some of the Shrine's most significant turning points, and there was no easy way to see him go. Other new colleagues of the Committee included Fathers John J. Murphy, Frederick McManus, and Kevin Seasoltz, O.S.B.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in 1968, Fr. Eamon took a sabbatical in Burlingame, California. Monsignor McDonough sent him a note on May 15, 1968 in which he assures him that the work at the Shrine was proceeding well. He tells him to enjoy the sabbatical, but also requests that he help artist Millard Sheets, of Claremont, California with the plans for several projects.<sup>19</sup> Sheets' earliest masterpiece was the "Triumph of the Lamb" inside the main sanctuary dome. Based on John's vision in chapters 5 and 6 of the Book of Revelation, the central figure is the Lamb of God, who was slain, but who lives forever. The Lamb is surrounded by four groups of elders, and by creatures symbolic of the four evangelists. These themes are truly ancient, appearing in the basilicas of Torcello, near Venice, and San Vitale in Ravenna. The brilliant colors of the central design are enhanced by use of Venetian glass, and the overall impression is indelible.<sup>20</sup>

In the overall context of the Shrine, much traditional Marian devotion had been called into question since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The American bishops saw a need to clarify and amplify Mary's part in the Church and in human salvation. Early in 1971, Monsignor McDonough began a discussion with Cardinal Carberry which ultimately led to the first ever pastoral letter by the Bishops on Mary's place in human spirituality. A committee of bishops drew up a first draft, which was then revised many times by Eamon Carroll to produce a much amplified second draft. This was sent to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for

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<sup>18</sup>. NSIC Archives, A-15, several communications, dated 9/12/66 to 1/17/68.

<sup>19</sup>. NSIC Archives, A-15.

<sup>20</sup>. DiFederico, pp.15f.

final approval, and promulgated under the title "Behold Your Mother" on November 14, 1973. The overall effect was to re-locate Marian veneration within God's plan of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

From about the middle of 1970, a discussion began on the themes of the six interior tympana over the side doors. Since the doors were triples, each transept would have a semi-circular tympanum over each door, with a global theme of the development of Marian doctrine. The minutes of the meeting of June 30, 1970 state that, although neither was present at that meeting, the help of Eamon Carroll and Kevin Seasoltz would be essential for this imposing task. In the same folder is a long and closely-typed (though undated) memo from Eamon presenting his detailed suggestions. He proposes that the six tympana display 1) Mary's perpetual virginity via the Synod of Milan, 2) Ephesus and the title Mother of God, 3) the Second Council of Nicea and Light of the Nations, 4) Queen of Nations, already suggested by Monsignor Skehan, 5) a combined group: Immaculate Conception + Assumption, and 6) Mother of the Church.<sup>22</sup> In the end, nearly all his suggestions came to pass. Second Nicea was not in fact used, and the vacancy was filled instead with the Vatican Council title of Mother of Holy Hope. But his other suggestions were followed in meticulous detail.

Early in 1980, Fr. Eamon submitted his resignation from the Committee, in anticipation of his transfer to Chicago and his pursuit of a position at Loyola University. Except for architect Kennedy, he was the longest-serving member of the Iconography Committee. It seems especially appropriate that the final major project which drew his attention was the chapel of Our Lady Queen of Ireland, which was dedicated in November of that same year.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. Tucker, pp.207-9.

<sup>22</sup>. NSIC Archives, B-23 (Iconography Committee).

<sup>23</sup>. Tucker, pp.231-3.

One final and very appropriate footnote was the decision to award Eamon the Shrine's Patronal Medal in September of 1989. That tradition began 15 years before, with a medal which honored Fulton J. Sheen. Since that beginning, subsequent awards had acclaimed fellow Committee members Kennedy and Grady.<sup>24</sup> For Fr. Eamon, the Medal was a source of singular pride, symbolizing as it did, a job well done.

Very well indeed!

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<sup>24</sup>. NSIC Archives, C-1.

