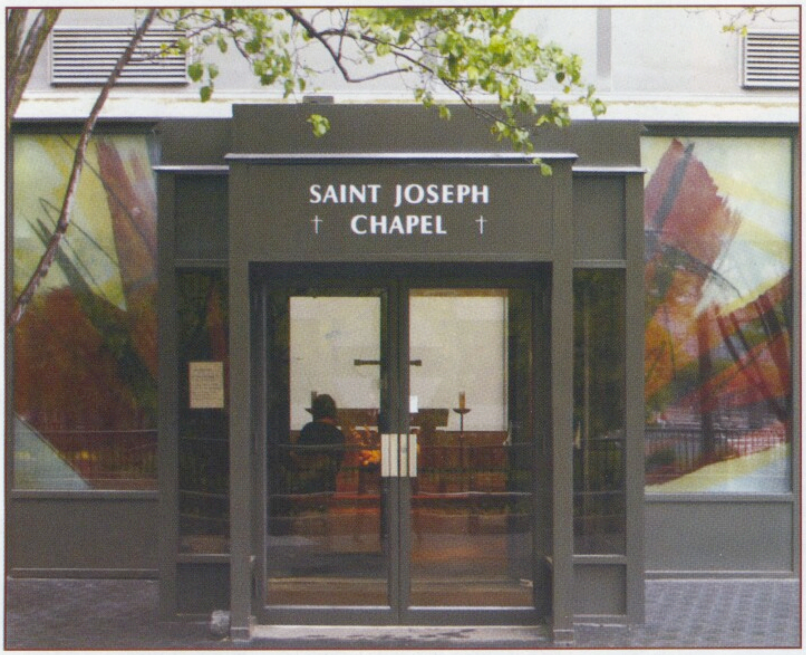
Lawrence R. Hoy

The Catholic Memorial at GROUND ZERO



Resurrection and Rebirth in Lower Manhattan

In recognition of this valiant and inspired effort, Ministry & Liturgy *and its parent family, Resource Publications, have devised a distinctive honor, the OPTIME. We were honored to visit the St. Joseph Chapel Ground Zero Memorial on May 29, 2005 (Memorial Day weekend), to present the OPTIME to Rev. Kevin Madigan and each of the contributing artists, as they had indeed accomplished, in "the best possible way," a sacred refuge and memorial.*

On September 11, 2001, our world changed forever. The world of the parishioners of St. Peter's Parish, the oldest in New York state, and nearby St. Joseph's Chapel in lower Manhattan was turned upside down. A wheel assembly from one of the airplanes that crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center went through a section of the roof of St. Peter's Church. The day after the attack, emergency crews moved into the chapel and set up the disaster control center for FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). They stripped the chapel and deposited its contents outside in the plaza.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." This passage from John 12:24 was chosen by Father Kevin Madigan, pastor of St. Peter's and St. Joseph's, as the inspiration for rebuilding. Though evidence of death and destruction was all around, there was also the sign of rebirth and regeneration, of hope and healing. Liturgical designer Lawrence Hoy of Renovata Studios was contacted to work with the parish rebuilding committee in October 2001. At the time, the parishioners were worshiping in a fitness center in Battery Park while the chapel was being used for dispensing needed supplies to the recovery workers, police officers,

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and firefighters on the scene. Father Madigan was counseling the workers in a tent pitched outside the chapel. Smoke was still rising from the fallen towers.

Many of the stalwart parishioners had been removed from both their homes and their church, but still, faith kept alive their vision of someday returning to altered yet normal lives. The committee met every month for nearly a year to discuss what the chapel should be as the closest Catholic presence to Ground Zero and as their spiritual home. It was decided that the chapel must primarily remain a place of worship for the people and families of the parish while paying homage to its historical role and location. The design of the space would reflect the life and nature surrounding the chapel. The memories of the tragedy would be inherent in the themes of the artwork chosen for shrine areas within the chapel. New liturgical art commissions by accomplished and talented artists would become an important aspect of this new chapel. This art would remain permanently, both as a memorial and as a vital part of the worship environment. The saints portrayed in shrine areas would be the patron saints of those who died in the disaster and those who contributed to the rescue and rebuilding efforts. Art glass would celebrate the Eucharist and become a welcoming portal to the city.

The chapel is a somewhat peculiar space for worship. It is on the ground floor of a 10-story concrete residential apartment building surrounded by commercial storefronts. The chapel has a low (8'6") ceiling, and the space is much wider than it is deep, with four large support columns in the center and window walls on the north and south sides. Allegedly, when Battery Park City was being built, the developer had slated the space for a dry cleaning business. One of the men working for him, a Catholic deacon, convinced him that a Catholic presence would help draw people to the area. The original St. Joseph's Church was torn down to build the World Trade Center.

Although it was never an architectural gem, the chapel is in a beautiful location. The entrance and northern glass facade open onto a large public plaza. The plaza and adjoining esplanade along the river evolved over the years into a wonderful playground for city dwellers. A bicycle and walking path begins at the southern tip of Manhattan and follows the river all the way uptown. Along the way are many pieces of public art and a few museums. There are memorials to the Holocaust and the Irish Potato Famine and numerous gardens. The Hudson River is cleaner than it has been in 40 years, providing new life above and below the surface of the water. Here, children learn to fish and pleasure boats ply the swift currents. Just outside the doors to the chapel is a yacht basin, formerly full of sailboats.

Parishioners were anxious to reclaim their chapel as soon as possible, so they decided to do the work in two phases. Phase 1, the design of the worship space, would have a major impact on the scale, materials, and colors of the artwork in Phase 2, so the first task was to create a profound liturgical environment. The elements that were objectionable were removed. No more red carpet or surface-mounted compact fluorescent light fixtures. Removing a wall-to-wall tapestry on the south side revealed a window wall half the length of

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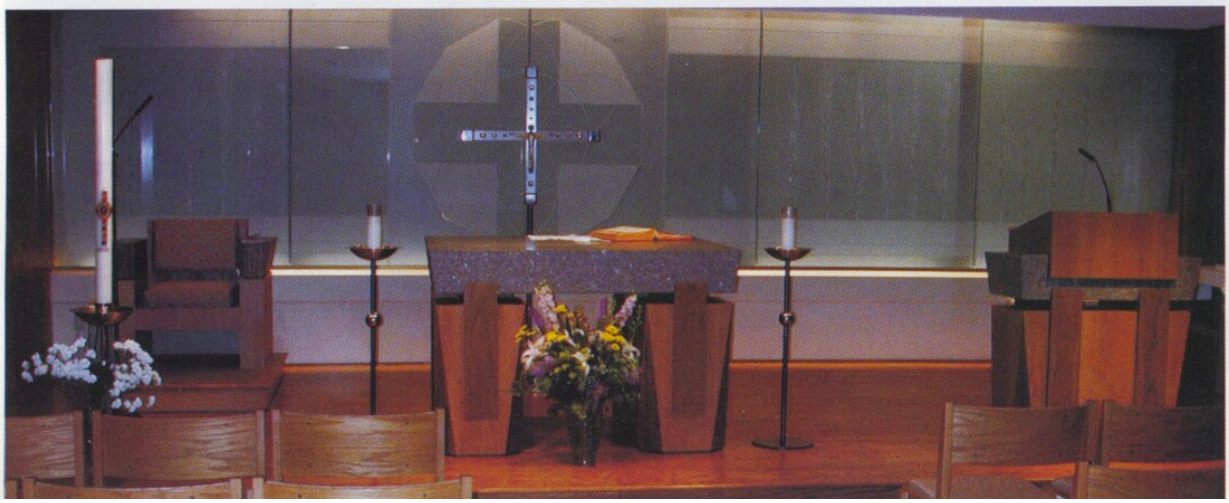

Our Lady of Guadalupe is located on the south wall near the sanctuary.

A large icon of Sts. John and Paul is in the niche leading to the reconciliation room.

A torso of Christ sculpted of the same material as the exterior of the World Trade Center (stainless steel) occupies the southwest corner of the chapel.

the chapel that had always been covered. Sheetrock walls hiding an office, closet, and reconciliation room were removed, exposing the concrete structural wall that supports the building. Removing the paint on the columns also revealed a beautiful concrete structure.

Rebirth and renewal were the theme for the new chapel design. The designers looked to the natural and man-made setting along the Hudson River for inspiration. A flowing river, gardens of native plants, and the heartbeat of city dwellers enjoying their leisure time were elements that inspired the design. When the concrete walls and columns supporting the chapel were treated with a special stain, it looked as though they were made of natural stone. A warm, natural, variegated slate was installed on the concrete floor, and the predella was rebuilt in oak. Compatible paint colors were chosen to reflect the subtle earth tones, and new, discreet lighting designed by Michael Castelli accentuated the positive architectural and liturgical elements.

The liturgical symbols and ritual pieces established the focus for worship. The liturgical furnishings, designed by Lawrence Hoy and fabricated by Renovata Studios, respond to the theme of rebirth and the fallen World Trade Center towers. The font, greeting all who enter, is a large immersion pool of Dakota Mahogany granite and is inscribed with the passage from John 12:24, carved into the coping. The altar supports, or stipes, are of oak and walnut. The walnut support for the mensa rises out of the stipes like a seedling bursting from its shell. The mensa is a solid block carved from the same granite as the font. The tabernacle of bronze and gilded wood is built into a solid granite tower like a late medieval tabernacle. Early tabernacles, or "sacrament houses," in northern Europe were often towering structures resembling cathedral spires. The connected symbolism of tower and tabernacle here uses this historic precedent as an intentional reference. The crucifix incorporates a small cross of steel cut from a structural beam of the WTC mounted on the side opposite the corpus. (A photo of this appears in ML [Feb. 2004], page 8.)

"Mystical and evocative" are words that describe the art glass along the south wall behind the sanctuary. The crucifix and tabernacle became the focal points for the carved glass by

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internationally acclaimed artist Christopher Cosma. The Resurrection Window, representing the triumph of life over death, incorporates the crucifix at the center of a dodecagon — 12 sides representing the 12 apostles — all set within a field of wheat (see ML [Nov. 2003], page 8). The carved rays of glass emanating from the tabernacle celebrate Christ as the light of the world. All of the glass is carved and etched on one or both sides, creating a visual barrier to the courtyard behind the chapel. The light from this south-exposure window floods the chapel with natural light throughout the day.

Phase 1 of the rebuilding was complete for the first anniversary of 9/11, and the parishioners of St. Joseph's could finally return to their parish home. It also marked the beginning of Phase 2, choosing the artists who would help define the chapel as a distinctive Catholic memorial to those who lost their lives and who contributed to the rescue and rebuilding effort. Father Madigan and the committee had already decided to create various shrine areas in the chapel dedicated to the patron saints of those people. Many artists were contacted to be interviewed. The artists ultimately chosen came from various religious traditions: Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic.

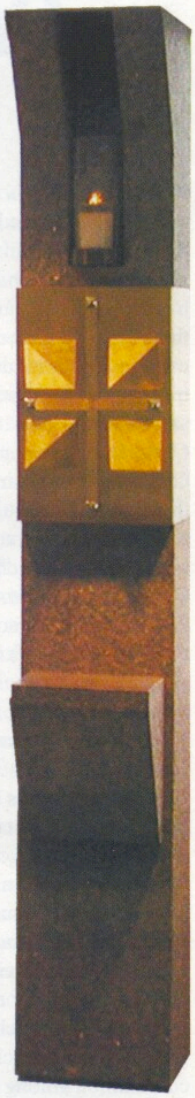
The east wall, nearest to Ground Zero, is a large expanse of solid concrete stained in a golden bronze hue. Along this wall, the committee decided, should be four bronze sculptures, nearly life-size, portraying St. Michael, St. Florian, St. Joseph, and St. Mary Magdalene. The artist chosen was John Collier, who used an ancient Greek sculpting technique, first modeling the figure as a nude, then applying the clothing, and finally casting the work in bronze. Heavily influenced by Rodin, his classic approach renders the work with a fresh yet timeless quality. St. Michael the Archangel honors the police officers who gave their lives attempting rescue and the exhausting work of recovery, and who continue to protect us each day. St. Florian honors the firefighters and EMS workers who ran fearlessly into peril, saving hundreds of lives while losing their own, who also took part in the grueling recovery effort and who continue to keep us safe. St. Joseph, the patron saint of workers, honors all the workers who perished on 9/11 as well as those who survived and those involved in the recovery and rebuilding effort. St. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection of Christ. Her statue honors all who serve: the airline pilots, flight attendants, everyone in the four planes and the thousands of volunteers who came to Ground Zero to give of themselves in the weeks and months following 9/11.

Throughout the chapel there are shrines to others who suffered from 9/11. Our Lady of Guadalupe is located on the south wall near the sanctuary. This bas-relief by artist Brett Slavin is sculpted in terra-cotta and glazed in brilliant colors. This shrine honors all immigrants who worked in the towers or were making deliveries at the hour of the attacks. A large icon of Sts. John and Paul is in the niche leading to the reconciliation room. Painted by artist Sister Cecelia of the Nuns of New Skete, the icon honors loyalty and friendship and memorializes friends who sacrificed their lives by remaining with a disabled or wounded friend or allowed a friend to precede them to safety, and all friends of those lost or affected by the attacks. A torso of Christ sculpted of the same material as the exterior of the World Trade Center (stainless steel) occupies the southwest corner of the chapel. This sculpture without arms is a reminder that we are to be the arms and hands of the risen Christ in the world today. In the southeast corner of the chapel is a glass sculpture depicting the words from Isaiah 2:4, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." This piece honors the peacemakers, those who respond with love and compassion instead of hate and revenge. Both of these sculptures are by artist Wiktor Szostalo.

The chapel portal of stained glass was created by glass artist Guy Kemper, who has pioneered a technique for creating glass with a painterly expressiveness. The glass installed around the doors speaks to collapse and rebirth. As one reenters the hustle and bustle of the city, the somber palette relays an inherent sadness while small, bright areas of yellow shine with the promise of better things to come. "The window is a flower, fearlessly growing from the ashes of its destruction, but it is far from triumphant," says Kemper.

In the future this chapel will serve the parishioners and workers in Battery Park City and will also serve visitors to Ground Zero and the new Freedom Tower. It will stand as a memorial to those who lost their lives and to those who helped in the rescue, recovery, and rebuilding mission of the great tragedy of September 11, 2001. Most importantly, it will be the spiritual home for this faith community. Many baptisms, weddings, funerals, and celebrations of the Eucharist will continue to forge the life of this downtown city parish for years to come. ML

Lawrence R. Hoy holds a BFA from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y., with concentrations in contemporary design and historic preservation.



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