

Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Worship Space
September 13, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

The walls were filled with photos of family members. There were the black and white pictures of small children. The color photos of weddings, baptisms and parties. Interspersed with these photos I could see a crucifix and an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

You can learn a lot about people by looking at the rooms in which they live. What you see in their dwelling place reveals a great deal about what they hold dear.

This particular day, I had been called to a nursing home to anoint a woman I had never met. She died before I got there. But I went in to bless her body. And when I finished, I looked at the photos in her room.

Later, when I spoke with her family, I was not surprised when they said to me, “Our mother had two passions – her family, and her faith.” Family and faith. That’s what I saw in her room. That was the truth of her life.

Now, if you walk into the home of my Aunt Wilma and glance at the walls you will see that her great passions are her husband, and Elvis... maybe not in that order!

At my parents’ home, the front room is full of family photos and cook books. That room tells you the foundations of my childhood – a family strengthened and united by sitting down daily at the table to share great food and real conversation.

There is the woman I visited whose house was strewn with sewing materials. I was not surprised when her family told me about the clothing that she made for three generations of children.

Sometimes rooms tell us *unfortunate* truths about the people who dwell there. A brother priest was invited to a family’s home for dinner. He was surprised to see a TV in every room (including the bathrooms!). So he was *not* surprised when the children (and dad) spent much of the meal ignoring the food and watching their cell phones.

Rooms – homes - reveal a great deal about what a person values and holds dear. Look carefully at the room, and you will see what is most important to the people who dwell there.

So... what about *this* room? If a stranger walked into this church building tonight, what would

they conclude about the people who gather and worship here? Saint Augustine said that buildings like this are a *domus ecclesiae*, a “home for the church.” The church is the People of God. *We* are the church. This building is a house for our family of faith.

So take a look. *What does this room reveal about us?*

Start by looking at what this room is made of. Stone and glass. Wood and metal. Wax and water. There’s nothing artificial here. No ‘synthetic wood’ or linoleum printed with a ‘fake marble surface.’ All of the materials are *honest*.

Which means that all of the materials come from the beauty of God’s creation. *We* did not start to building this church 11 years ago. *God* started to build this church hundreds of thousands of years ago, when God created the marble and slate that is on the floor, when God made sure that copper and iron would form in the depths of the earth, when God made sure that trees would grow.

God started building this church millions of years ago, when God created the sand that can be fired into glass and shaped into windows. God has been building this building since before humans walked the earth.

This room declares that the people who gather here understand that *everything starts with God*. The people who worship here know that God is the source of everything, every gift, every blessing. Without God we have nothing. God is the foundation of our lives.

What else does this room tell us? All of these beautiful things came from God’s creation, but they all were enhanced by human artistry. As the old prayer said, they are gifts which “earth has given and human hands have made.”

God made the stones and metals – humans learned how to shape and sculpt them. God made the trees - humans learned how to carve them. God made wood and ivory and metal - humans figured out how to put them together as a Steinway.

God gives us the raw materials. And then God gives us the ability to work and create. This room, ‘which earth has given and human hands have made,’ declares that the people who gather here understand that we called to be good stewards of God’s creation. We are to use whatever unique skills God has given each of us, to create a more humane and holy world.

On a foundational level, this room says that we understand that our lives are precious gifts from God. As long as we live, our task is to work with godly artistry to create a life that is holy and generous and good.

What else does this room say? It says that we are a people who have found healing in the waters of Baptism. The serpents of this world still bite at us, but we have found wholeness in the healing waters which flow from the pierced side of Jesus.

Jesus is the living water. In Baptism, we are immersed in his love, enlivened by his spirit, washed clean, made whole and called to serve in his name. We can't enter or leave this room without encounter the Font. It all starts in the water, where we encounter the Healer of our every ill.

What else does this room say? Well, a stranger might conclude that we are a *morbid people!* In many ways, the most striking visual focus of this entire space is this magnificent image of a horrible killing - an artistic rendering of the death penalty in action. Why would people, like us, gather in a space, like this, and focus on a cross, a crucifix?

Why? Because Christian experience teaches us that love often looks like *this*. Some may see this as an image of defeat and horror. But Christian living teaches us that, sometimes, love looks like this. It looks like sacrifice. Love looks like giving, giving without counting the cost.

The cross declares that God was willing to enter into all of our experiences of defeat, heartbreak and loss, so that we would never be alone in those moments.

The cross reveals the unthinkable humility of the Christ. He left behind what looked like power, and entered into our weakness. He embraced whatever breaks us, in order to make us whole. He walked through the doorway of death, to open the doorway of eternal life.

This room says that the people who dwell here have learned to dwell in the Christian paradox – dying leads to living, emptying leads to fullness, poverty is our real riches. On the cross, Christ received people's hate and fear, and from the cross he spoke a word of forgiveness and promise.

We win by losing. We live by dying.

What else does this room say? It says that we are a people who find our real identity, *not* in our career, not in our earnings or power – we find our lasting identity when we gather around a common table to share the most uncommon meal.

That large table in the middle of this room declares that the people who gather here understand: life is not about *me*, it's about *we*. Life is not about what I can consume, it's about what we share. Life is not about holding on and getting more, it's about opening our hands and letting go.

That large table in the middle of this room declares that the people who gather here know that Someone else has prepared the banquet and Someone else has created the guest list. It's the Lord's supper we share here, and God is the one who invites us in. Which means that we do not get to determine who comes through the door, or who sits next to us, or who is "worthy."

All of God's children – those of every race and tongue, those from every land and place, people of every background, political persuasion, sexual orientation and life situation – the doors are open to all, because the Lord is the one who does the inviting.

At this table, in this room, we experience the real presence of the Lord. We experience the presence of Christ in the person sitting next to us, in the faces we see sitting across from us. We experience Christ's presence in the Word that is proclaimed here, the music that we sing here, the rituals we enact here. We experience Christ, present, in a bit of bread, a sip of wine, which by the Holy Spirit's action is much more than a bit and a sip.

This room tells us who we are... *but we don't live here.*

We live out there, where hunger, racism, poverty, fear and hatred threaten another generation of God's children.

Which is why we need a room like this... a place where we can be reminded and renewed. This room tells us: everything depends on God. With God's help, we can create lives, and a world, full of beauty. This room tells us: we belong to Christ in whom we have been baptized. This room tells us: the Christian life only makes sense when lived in the shadow of the cross. This room tells: Christ's presence nourishes us here, so that *we* can nourish the hungers of the world.

Thank God that, ten years ago, we were able to make such a room. Thank God that we have even more time to make even more room for Christ and one another, in our lives and hearts.

May the Lord be praised now and forever.