

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Look Up!

My first thought: They don't build them like this anymore.

I had just entered the new Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph, on Pacific Street in Brooklyn on the night it was to be rededicated. And I couldn't take my eyes off it. To call the restored and renovated building "beautiful" somehow isn't enough.

It's a stunner. And when you walk down that center aisle and soak in everything around you—the fresh white marble in the sanctuary, the elegantly painted walls, the murals and frescoes of Mary and the saints, the soaring vaulted ceilings, the lovingly restored stained glass windows, the vibrant colors that leap off the walls—you just want to stand and gawk.

They really *don't* build them like this anymore. And it's tempting to just stand there in awe. In fact, again and again as I made my way to my seat for the dedication, I saw the same thing: priests and deacons, sisters and lay people, craning their necks to stare at the ceiling, their jaws open in wonder. They were marveling at the 20 oval murals now adorning the ceiling, each from a different foreign apostolate in this "diocese of immigrants," each depicting the Blessed Mother as she is known and loved in that particular country, identified by the native language and the national flag.

And again and again, as Bishop DiMarzio rededicated this grand church—one first used by the faithful exactly 100 years ago—my eyes were drawn upward. Up, to the new main altar; up, to the gleaming tabernacle; up to the towering marble pulpit; up to the baldacchino, that soaring covering over the altar with the words from Exodus etched in Latin "*Ite Ad Joseph*," or "Go to Joseph." And my eyes continued to look above, to a gleaming marble statue of St. Joseph atop the baldacchino.

And I came to realize something surprising: This is what we crave: We want to look up. We want our hearts, our thoughts, our vision directed above. We yearn for what is beyond us. We desire heaven.

The Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph expresses that desire in stone, and then some. Msgr. Kieran Harrington, the co-cathedral's rector, has said that a church should "transform" people who enter it, and I think this new co-cathedral does it powerfully. There is so much to see, absorb, admire.

The eyes are assaulted by color and vibrancy and life. Is some of it too much? Maybe. There is a grandeur and ornateness to the building that harken to another time, another sensibility, another understanding of what it means to be a Church. It is an understanding that places God perpetually above, in Word and Sacrament; to listen to the gospel or watch the consecration, you have to strain and look up. Taken together, there is a sense of scope and scale to the building that can only leave you feeling humbled—and awed.



Frankly, I think that is how it should be. The experience of attending church should readjust our perspective.

But, of course, that's not all. Scripture tells us that after Jesus ascended to heaven, angels appeared to the apostles. Like all those people in St. Joseph's that night, the apostles were also staring skyward, up to the heavens. "Men of Galilee," the angels asked, "why do you stand there looking at the sky?" And with that, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to begin the great work of converting the world.

After feasting on the beauty of a place like St. Joseph's—or, the beauty of our own parish church, which also directs our minds and hearts heavenward—we all need to return to our own Jerusalems, our own lives, to confront the world around us. It makes more urgent the dismissal we hear at the end of the liturgy: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life."

We should enter a church and raise our eyes; we should leave it and see the world directly before us. It is a world waiting for us to make it new. We should be inspired by what we have witnessed, and transformed by what we have received.

Tellingly, as you leave St. Joseph's, you have to descend down a steep row of stairs. You need to look where you're going and get your bearings, reorient yourself to what is outside the church walls, and focus more intently on the world around you.

Isn't that how all of us should feel on leaving church?

They really don't build churches like St. Joseph's anymore—or like Our Lady Queen of Martyrs, for that matter. But I'm thinking, maybe they should.

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May 07, 2017 - Fourth Sunday of Easter