

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

A Work in Progress

Some time ago I spent four days in the Kentucky hills, on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the celebrated Trappist monastery made famous by Thomas Merton. It was a weekend touched with grace and good cheer: beautiful weather, haunting liturgies and long walks through the rambling woods nearby.

It was also a weekend when I had lots of time to sit in silence and think. I spent a couple hours a day in the abbey church, praying the psalms with the monks and watching the light from the windows dapple the plain white walls. The church has a vast, empty feel to it. It's almost boring.

But, if I listened hard enough, between the psalms and the silence, I could hear the walls speak. They spoke, quite simply, of incompleteness. And, I think, it was meant to be that way.

The abbey church at Gethsemani is probably the world's starkest example of Cistercian architecture—architecture that is the very essence of simplicity. There is supposed to be nothing unnecessary adorning the church. And that's true: The Kentucky church is all whitewashed walls, plain wooden beams and pebbled floors. It is a place of texture, as if meant to be touched.

But what exactly are we touching? The church looks like a rough outline, rather than a final draft; it seems somehow unfinished, as if a lot of the work were left undone.

No statues? No shrines? No decoration? When will the workers be back to finish the job? But that, I think, is the point.

As I gazed up at the soaring walls, and the sturdy beams, I realized that the workers are actually there, every day, in the choir and the balcony, filling the space with prayer.

To look at that abbey church is to look at a work in progress—filled with people who are themselves works in progress. We are imperfect and unfinished. And in the daily chanting of the psalms we somehow struggle to refine ourselves, and our world. We are finishing the work begun by God.

It's that way with so much of the Catholic Church. Catholic Christianity is itself a work in progress—constantly being refined, sanded, polished, completed. It's a job that will never be done. It needs work. And it needs workers.

And so here we are, filling the pews every Sunday with our prayers and our pleas. We are the laborers, finishing what God started. We are

His stonemasons and carpenters, His painters and plumbers. He has given us the blueprint, and erected the walls. It's up to us to complete the task.

That is what the stark white walls of Gethsemani had to say to me that weekend. There is work to be done. Grab a hammer. Climb the ladder. Add something that will leave this world, our Church, our community of faith, a little bit more complete.

It is the great work of centuries—really, the great work of history. Want to pass me a hammer?



Abbey of Gethsemani