# Sacred Heart Church: What Might Have Been

## William G. Storey

*Sacred Passion, The Art of William Schickel.* By Gregory Wolfe. University of Notre Dame Press, 1998. 162 pages.

Both the author and the press are to be congratulated on the clarity and beauty of this informative and remarkable volume of marvelous photographs and illuminating text.

William Schickel was a student at Notre Dame in the 1940s who immersed himself in the available inspirations of that time and place and became a disciple of the neo-Thomists Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. As the son of the well-known Catholic architect William Schickel the elder, who designed some 150 buildings in Manhattan, he was well situated to draw both on his family background and on the philosophy of good work he imbibed at Notre Dame. Among his teachers were James Withy and Thomas Stritch and the even more influential Frank O'Malley and Yves Simon. In his final year at Notre Dame he was introduced to the stained glass of the famed Emil Frei, Jr.. So impressed was he by the religious quality and the contemporay esthetic of Frei, that after graduation he went to St. Louis and apprenticed himself to that master craftsman who taught him both the art of glass making and the art of living. Schickel also fell in love with Frei's daughter Mary, another idealist, who was destined to become his wife and the mother of his eleven children.

With his background in neo-Scholasticsm and under the influence of Frei's Bauhaus leanings, Schickel emerged as a "less is more" artist in many mediums, all of them characterized by clarity, simplicity, and a kind of poverty of means. After making these points in chapter one of Sacred Passion, Gregory Wolfe devotes the remainder of his book to illustrating and explaining a series of remarkable architectural and artistic achievements that make Schickel a front-rank contributor to the liturgical revival both before and after the secondVatican Council.

Even if we can't go on pilgrimage to any one of his great achievments — the Grailville Oratory, the church of the Abbey of Gethsemani, or the shrine church of St. Philippine Duchesne, St. Charles, Missouri—we can be startled into admiration by the admirable photographs of his work. His "less is more" philosophy results in worship spaces characterized by a kind of Shaker simplicity allied to a profound theology of Catholic liturgy. His respect for his materials — mostly stone and wood — and his preference for the abstract rather than the merely illustrative make his churches the perfect settings for the reformed and vernacular liturgy of our time.

Schickel's redesigning of a church like that of Gethsemani (Merton's home monastery) is perhaps more of an achievement than anything he designed from scratch. He was able to take a basically good building overladen with the kitsch and sentimentality of generations of pious monks out of touch with their Cistercian origins and turn it back into a place of worship fit for St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He and Thomas Merton saw eye to eye in these matters:

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"I just want to tell you what a splendid job I think you have done in our Abbey Church and the Cloister. I particularly like the interior of the church — bright, simple, clear-cut, no nonsense and perfectly in accord with the spirit of our life. Also I am glad to recognize that it is still my Abbey Church, the place of my vows and first mass — without its ancient defects" (Letter of Merton to Schickel).

Schickel's churches and chapels are austere; not the austerity of the parking garage but of a building stripped to the essentials of the Catholic liturgy. It is an architecture that does not draw attention to itself but focuses all attention on the ambo, the altar, and the font. Other distracting points of interest are either eliminated or redirected in a way that enhances the centrality of the essential features. His art serves a liturgy "liberated from a welter of confusing decorative details!" (Thomas Merton).

His stained glass bears the same marks. His windows are not paintings of religious subjects reduced to glass. Most of them are pure abstractions of light refracting materials that illuminate the sacred space without "the kind of banal narrative against which stained glass artists such as Emil Frei and Schickel were reacting" (p. 70). His windows are not meant to be looked at but to be media of enhanced light for the assembly of baptized Christians.

The recent renovation of Sacred Heart Church on the Notre Dame campus could have drawn upon the talents of a great religious artist like William Schickel. As an alumnus of the university where he learned so many of his principles and attitudes and as a vigorous and devout Catholic, it seems logical that he would have been proud to have participated in that project. As we can see, of course, Schickel was not consulted and the result is an expensive and wretched failure. When we contemplate what could have been accomplished and what would have set the university church in the forefront of liturgical and artistic renewal, we can only regret this sin of omission.

One example, like the unrenovated monastic church of Gethsemani, Sacred Heart Basilica has too many altars in plain sight and line of view. It is still dominated by the old gothic altar and towering sacrament house of Father Sorin's time. To this piece of nostalgia and unreconstructed theology one must add visually the gold baroque altar of the lady chapel that glows in the distance. Finally, as a kind of afterthought, we have the modest and simple square altar of the 1960's renewal. Together they make a clear statement: more is less.

Let us allow our author, Gregory Wolfe, to have the last word. "For Schickel, the irony of the abbey church at Gethsemani was that it possessed little in the way of 'energy and simplicity and purity,' much less 'originality.' The Gothic shell had no organic relationship either to the structure and materials of the church or to the American context in which it existed. The church's ornamentation, along with dark stained glass, had created a 'ponderous' environment full of distractions to the spirit. 'I feel certain that one hundred years ago, in this isolated part of the world, [the church] seemed almost like something magical and awesome in its pseudo-elegance. I think it was for them a stirring and phenomenal achievement but it was one that was culturally nostalgic and regressive and has burdened the monastery ever since' (William Schickel, "Unifying the Old and the New," *Liturgical Arts*, 36, no. 4 (August, 1968), p. 100."

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