

# CENTENNIAL GAZETTE

St. James Cathedral, Seattle

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## AROUND THE TABLE

The renovation of the Cathedral was announced on November 28, 1990, and soon the work was underway. By early 1991, the Renovation Committee (with its many sub-committees) had been formed. And at about the same time, Father Ryan engaged the services of Father Richard Vosko, a priest from Albany, New York, who had served as liturgical consultant on several highly-regarded renovation projects. Father Vosko explored the Cathedral from top to bottom. It was he who told Father Ryan, "This is a centrally-planned building. And that's where the altar should be: at the center."

A centrally-planned building! St. James certainly didn't feel like a centrally-planned building: the Renaissance symmetry of the architecture was obscured by arcades that ran across the transepts, and the depth of the sanctuary concealed the fact that the east and west ends of the building were actually of equal length. But Father Vosko was right. If the altar were placed at the center of the building—at the crossing of the nave and transepts—the architecture of the building would suddenly make sense. And even more important, a centrally-placed altar would bring the assembly close to the liturgical action. Gathered around the altar, the people would be able to see each other; they would become more aware of their own important role in the celebration of the liturgy.

The idea of the central altar is hardly new. Some of the most ancient churches are built on a circular plan, and St. Peter's in Rome is a good example of a centrally-planned Renaissance building, with the altar placed squarely at the crossing. And indeed, as they researched the architecture of St. James, the team soon found that the idea of a central altar in St. James Cathedral was not a new concept at all. A 1905 article on the building of the Cathedral in the Seattle P-I had stated that "under the great central dome will stand the altar!"

From that key decision flowed virtually all the other changes made in the Cathedral renovation: the placement and design of the ambo, the cathedra and the presider's chair, the font, and the Blessed Sacrament



An early design for the font by Bumgardner Architects. This sketch, dated August 1993, reveals one of the main principles of the renovation: to retain the beauties of the old Cathedral while creating a new space in keeping with the teachings of the Council. (It was Father Ryan who eventually suggested the quatrefoil as the shape for the font, echoing the shape of the Cathedral itself. He was inspired by Kenneth Branagh's film *Much Ado About Nothing*—watch it to find out why!)

Chapel. Though there was much discussion of each of these elements, the placement of the altar at the center of the building was such a sound decision—both architecturally and theologically—that in a certain sense the other elements simply fell into place.

Not that there wasn't a considerable amount of debate! With so many people bringing their energy and creativity to the project, it was inevitable that many ideas—good and otherwise—would have to be abandoned. One proposal called for stripping the entire interior down to the red brick—a Pioneer Square look. Another suggestion involved the removal of all the images of the saints to a 'Saints' Chapel,' with all the statues tucked into little niches, and a bench running down the middle so you could sit in front of the saint of your choice. At

one point someone suggested having a projector installed so that the numbers of the hymns could be projected onto the wall. Some wanted to replace all the stained glass; others didn't want to replace anything at all. Much consideration was given to the building of a gathering space, which proved prohibitively expensive; and the idea of an ecumenical chapel was entertained at one point.

Through all this brainstorming, which took place not only in the meetings of the Renovation Committee but in seminars and listening sessions attended by hundreds of parishioners and people from across the Archdiocese, Father Ryan kept the primary goals of the renovation clear. The Cathedral needed to be a place for the celebration of the Church's liturgy, but it also needed to nourish the private devotion of the people. It needed to respect tradition, keeping what was good from the past; but it also needed to make room for the best of what our own generation had to offer. And even as many ideas fell by the wayside, an extraordinary vision of St. James Cathedral emerged. Bumgardner Architects, and in particular architects Donald Brubeck and Stephen Lee, and Lease Crutcher Lewis contractors would bring that vision to life.

—Corinna Laughlin