

Chapel Architecture Enhances Worship

By S.L. Hansen

DENTON (SNR) –While it is very new, the \$5.3 million Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton appears to be centuries old, thanks to traditional architecture.

Indeed, architect Thomas Gordon Smith of South Bend, Indiana, and Father Charles Van Vliet, FSSP, who oversaw the project on behalf of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, intentionally created the classical Romanesque style for this chapel.

The Romanesque style was developed sometime between the sixth and tenth centuries, drawing on both Byzantine and Western Roman buildings. It is characterized by thick walls, round arches, sturdy piers, and decorative arcading (support beams).

In the Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul, soaring ceilings supported by elaborately stenciled beams raise the eye to heaven. A beautiful, carved white marble baldachinum (canopy) surrounds the lovely main altar with its golden tabernacle. Polished wooden monastic choir stalls line the nave (the central approach to the high altar).

Father Van Vliet explained that every element of the church is intended to help with

the celebration of the Mass in many different ways.

“The way Saint Augustine speaks about it,” he said, “the church is like a human body.”

From a birds-eye view, it’s easy to imagine the cross-shaped building as a person with his or her arms outstretched. The altar is at the head. The choir seating runs along the nave, which is fitting because, as Father Van Vliet put it, “The people within the building structure are also part of the mystical Body of Christ.”

Acoustics were always a main concern, as the Extraordinary Form relies heavily on Gregorian chant. Father Van Vliet consulted monasteries in Europe to learn which architectural elements were crucial.

“There was one drawback: what’s good for chant is not good for speaking,” Father Van Vliet said.

A modern public address system was added for the sacred ministers to use during homilies. It was carefully tuned to prevent echoing, and the speakers were camouflaged with paint to be as little noticed as possible.

A total of 12 years have gone into the design and construction of the seminary and chapel. After interviewing a few architects, Father Van Vliet



DENTON - The chapel at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary near Denton sits on a ridge, enjoying breathtaking sunsets. Father Charles Van Vliet, FSSP, who oversaw the project on behalf of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, said it was important to choose a site suitable for the seminarians’ seven years of formation. (SNR photo by S.L. Hansen)

was eager to work with Mr. Smith because of the latter’s knowledge of and enthusiasm for Romanesque architecture.

Mr. Smith first became excited about this classic style when he was a 19-year-old architecture student studying in France. He would frequently use his spare time to travel to old churches and monasteries for inspiration.

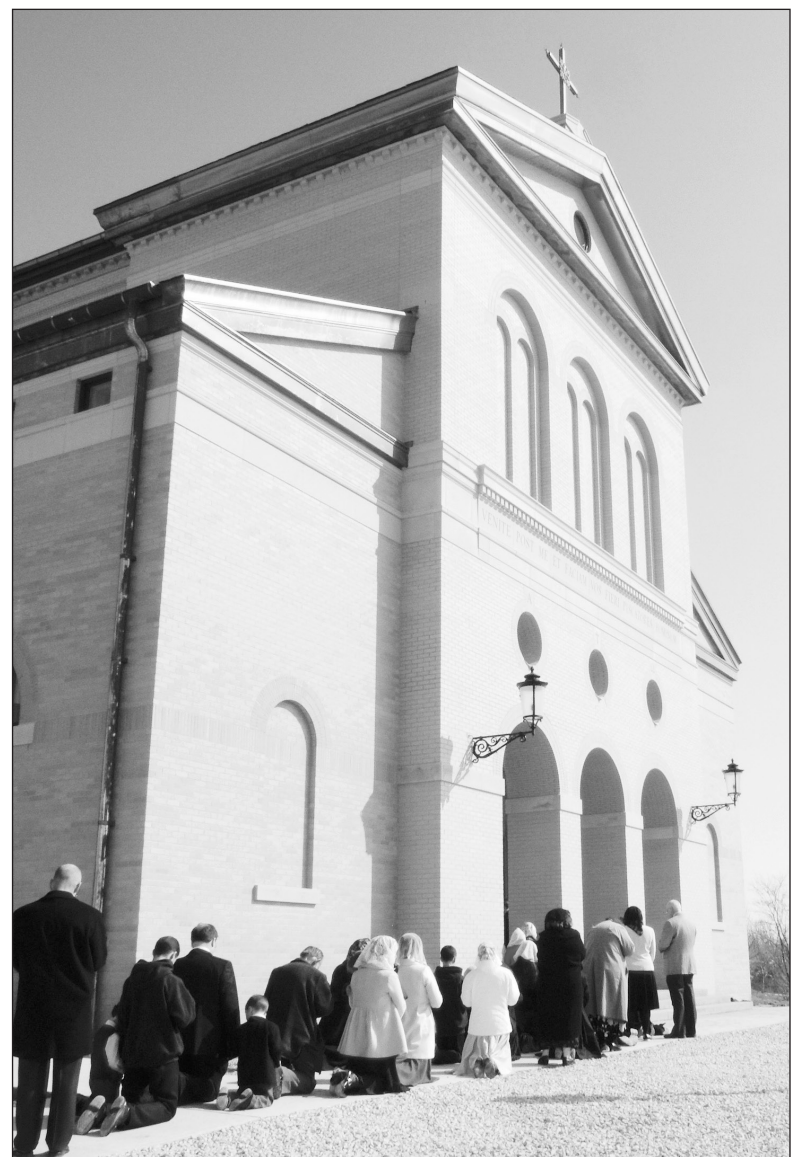
On their first trip to the Nebraska to find a site for the new seminary in the Diocese of Lincoln, Father Van Vliet and Mr. Smith were gratified to find the ideal setting in Denton. The chapel sits on a ridge, enjoying breathtaking sunsets. The academic and residential buildings are sited along the downward slope to the north.

“Our men are in seminary for seven years,” reasoned Father Van Vliet. “It had to be a setting that was suitable for seven years of formation.”

Over the next 12 years, Father Van Vliet and Mr. Smith collaborated closely on the design and structure of each building.

Father Van Vliet, Mr. Smith said, “has been a co-designer for so many aspects of this project. It’s been ideal... He has so much devotion to the goals of the fraternity. And he’s very resourceful.”

With the chapel’s hefty price tag, economies were sought whenever possible. Father Van Vliet was able to salvage the impressive baldachinum, the main altar and four of the side altars from a parish that was closing in Quebec City. The other three altars were pieced together from that parish’s marble communion rails, some materials that were left over from the new chapel’s flooring and slabs that were



PLANNING - Faithful laity who watched the consecration of the new chapel at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary near Denton on channel EWTN in overflow room eagerly gathered outside the chapel during the first Pontifical High Mass ever to be celebrated in the chapel, kneeling on the pavement to await their turns to receive Communion. Father Van Vliet said 12 years went into the design and construction of the seminary and chapel and that every element of the church is intended to help with the celebration of the Mass in many different ways. (SNR photo by S.L. Hansen)



ALTAR - The Altar of St. Joseph is pictured at the Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton. The chapel has eight altars in all, because the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite does not accommodate concelebration of the Mass. Multiple altars enable large numbers of priests to celebrate Mass in a single day when they gather at Our Lady of Guadalupe seminary. (SNR photo by S.L. Hansen)

donated by benefactors.

Father Van Vliet did a great deal of work personally, from repairing the main altar to cutting the stencils by hand and directing a crew of seminarians in the decorative painting, to laying pavers at the front of the building.

For him, it was especially gratifying to co-consecrate the chapel and to be part of the first pontifical high Mass ever said on its altars.

“It was wonderful,” he said. “I’ve been working on it for so long... it’s hard to describe the emotions.”