

## **“When can we see Jesus?”**

**Michael R. Kapetan**

Jesus was not foremost in my mind at ten o'clock that Friday morning, August 25, 2000. I wasn't worried about him. I knew his time would come. For now he was safely wrapped in plastic and old window curtains resting on his cross in the back of the rental truck parked outside the rear door of the new chapel. With him in the truck, also safely wrapped in cloth and plastic, were the altar, ambo, credence table, presider's chair, and tabernacle. The entire ensemble of liturgical furnishings, when installed, would define the sacramental axis of the chapel of Sts. Cyril and Methodius at the Orchard Lake Seminary. But we were not going to see Jesus or any of the other handiwork until a lot of other work was completed within these red brick walls. At best we were hours away from hoisting him to his place of prominence in the center of the space, suspended between the cupola and the altar. But now, at ten o'clock on Friday morning, this chapel was not ready for Jesus.

At this hour on Friday, the sacramental axis of the chapel, indeed the entire chapel, remained a chaotic construction site. The building was barely closed in. Roofers were still crimping seams in the ridges and valleys of the fresh copper roof. The center of the small room, only forty-five feet square and sixty-five feet tall at the peak of the octagonal cupola that crowned the space, was occupied by thirty feet of scaffolding with electricians clambering on it to wire the lights. And the remainder of the floor was alive with masons setting marble floor tiles, and carpenters installing pews as fast as the carpet layers could lay carpet in front of them. In the little chinks of space left between all of this mess, other crews worked at finishing the heating, air conditioning, and sound systems.

It all seemed like an improbable time-lapse compression of the Medieval guilds building a cathedral. What those ancient craftsmen had spent generations doing, we had to complete between now and Cardinal Maida's certain appearance to consecrate the church on Sunday morning August 27. That schedule had been locked in weeks ago, after the roofers' strike that began in May had spoiled the first planned-for blessing on June 15. Before the strike, I had worked double time to carve the life-size Jesus in time for the Cardinal. Fortunately, I could call upon outstanding woodcrafters to help me with the other items of furniture. I hired Rame Nelson in Walled Lake, and my brother in Ft. Lauderdale to build the structures and Mark Kresic in Ann Arbor to fashion intricate inlays of the altar in time for the June opening. Had we been pressed, we just might have been able to deliver the goods in mid-June as promised. But as the strike dragged on through June and the furniture began to arrive from the subcontractors, my headache became storage. I could have held mass in my basement if there had been room to stand in the clutter of holy furniture.

Jesus had spent the last five weeks cached in a corner of the Detroit Design Studio shop, where he had received his final stain and finish by the hand of Resi Feil. Seemingly

ageless, Resi has begun threatening to retire. She is anything but retiring. Always forward, always energetic and blunt, her character spelled out in one desperate, terror gripped moonless night in nineteen fifty, hazarding no man's land to flee East Germany. By several slightly less unlikely turns since then, she became proprietor of one of Detroit's premier custom furniture shops. Never content merely to run the business of the shop, she made herself into a master of wood finishing, and the brilliant patina on Jesus was her work.

At six feet tall, this Jesus is the largest single figure I have yet carved. The clay maquette, just a foot tall, could clearly describe the graceful arc of the figure touching the cross only at hands and feet. But at life-size, the sculpture called for greater detail in the straining anatomy. A live model was out of the question. The figure is too taut, too precariously balanced for a model to hold a pose. The feet, crossed right over left and pierced by a single nail are the only variance from perfect symmetry in this figure, and as such, they set this figure in motion. If they are like anything, these feet are like a dancer's feet en pointe. So I turned to my folio of Annie Liebovitz photos of the "White Oak Dance Project," given me by one of its premier dancers, Nancy Colahan. Gradually, as the carving progressed, Jesus became a seamless collage of dancers' anatomies. He acquired Jamie Bishton's feet, Mikhail Baryshnikov's arms, Rob Besserer's back and shoulders. And one non-dancer, Mike Kapetan's hands. The face, thin, chipped, aquiline, serene came from... where? With the carving complete, Jesus needed a coat of color to knit together the many blocks of basswood in his head, arms, legs, torso, and cross. Resi gave him just that—unity and warmth. The figure and cross would be slightly darker than the deep, rich pine of the chapel's ceiling, pilasters, and beams.

Of all the churches and chapels that he might have consecrated in his lifetime, this one would be absolutely unique for Cardinal Maida, because the trio of stained glass windows set high in the west wall bore his personal insignia. The corresponding three windows high in the south wall bore the insignia of Pope John Paul II. Very much a Polish Catholic Seminary, John Paul II had walked this ground twice, once as Pope and once before as Cardinal Woytila. Ground to ceiling trios of windows in the north and east walls carried images of god the father and god the holy spirit. God the son dancing on his cross waited in the truck.

Maybe twenty trades-men buzzing all around. I had my own team there, too, Rame Nelson and his crew, Ian and Mike. Along with the standard suite of liturgical furnishings waiting for us out in the truck, we were right now installing a freestanding triptych frame thirteen feet wide and eleven feet high, its left and right wings built to hold glass panels five feet by five feet etched with sixteen Polish and two American saints and crowned at its center by a two feet by three feet mosaic of Our Lady of Czestowa. The glass artist, Ken Pellar was standing by, waiting for us. We were standing by, waiting for the carpet layers.

Rame Nelson had built the triptych frame. A craftsman after Nakashima's spirit of the tree, and peerless at handling wood, Rame had come to his craft much as I had come to mine. We had fought our way out of Vietnam's disillusionment in the faith that doing

good work might equal working good. He shot me a wry grin from behind his gray moustache and wire glasses when I asked him if the frame and its glass burden might be installed by noon as we had planned. Any idea of keeping our original schedule had to be a joke, and just as Rame laughed, Monsignor Milewski called from behind me, “When can we see Jesus?”

This new chapel of Sts. Cyril and Methodius was the parting service of Monsignor Stanislaus Milewski to the Seminary here on the north shore of Orchard Lake. He had officially retired in June after forty years administering and teaching Polish Catholic priests here. They had been holding mass in a basement room that had been adapted to use as a temporary chapel eighty years ago. The Monsignor decided that it was finally time to build new. So in his last years of official work, he found the donors hired the architect and proceeded without caution.

Constantine George (Gus) Pappas had earned his tuition for architecture school by playing keyboard in a Greek dance band. The music of his buildings sounds from their bold geometry and fine proportions. This chapel stands in the spirit of the Romanesque, angular and muscular. On the exterior, four stout gabled brick walls carry copper sheathed roofs that converge at the base of a sturdy octagonal steel framed lantern, capped in copper, and surmounted by a stainless steel cross. Inside, pairs of massive laminated pine pilasters centered on each wall frame the stained glass windows and support beams that cantilever inward to receive the weight of the lantern. From four inner faces of the octagonal ring would hang the cables that suspend the crucifix directly on the central axis of the building.

A rarity among architects, Gus seeks out artists. He gathered a team of four to join him and the governing clergy in fleshing out his vision for the chapel. We all agreed on the wisdom of bringing the best art of the old basement chapel up into the new building—the Stations of the Cross, the Baptismal font, the woodcarving of Cyril and Methodius. But the Chapel needed much new art. All the work out in the truck that I had designed and carved, Ken Pellar’s etched glass saints, Margaret Cavanaugh’s windows, and Marian Owczarski’s stainless cross and mosaics which would form the backdrop to the new tabernacle. The lasting brilliance of the Catholic Church has been to safeguard its spiritual core in the embrace of art. As much as its written theology sweats in Jesuitical logic, its deeper mysticism sings in the lines of Cimabue, Michelangelo, and Matisse.

At the heart of this new space, the literal and figurative center, in the base of the new altar, standing beneath the crucifix, would rest a bejeweled gold reliquary housing fragments of the mortal remains of the two sainted Greek brothers from Thessaloniki. The younger had a gift for languages. Cyril would give his name to the alphabet that he devised for the Slavs. The older, Constantine, who took the name Methodius when elevated to Bishop, was blessed with the diplomat’s touch. Together, they had carried Christianity to the Serbians, Macedonians, and Bulgarians, who would become Eastern Orthodox, as well as to the Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Poles, who would become Roman Catholic. Now, some part of the brothers’ bones would rest in a new altar in a new chapel overlooking one of Michigan’s most storied inland lakes. Out there on the

island in the middle of Orchard Lake, Chief Pontiac had held war councils. Now we held our own council.

“Good morning, Monsignor. Jesus is in the truck, but we can’t bring him in until the screen is done and the marble is set in the floor. We’re waiting on the carpet guys before we can set the glass and the mosaic in the frame. Maybe by three o’clock this afternoon”

This wide, wise man in clerical black with white collar and white halo of hair framing a high ruddy forehead creased with perpetually quizzical creases, paused, considered my schedule and generously offered, “If we can help you, let us know.” Then he was off, darting across campus on his white golf cart.

Everything takes longer than you think. We had just muscled the second etched glass panel into the triptych frame when three o’clock and Monsignor Milewski arrived.

“Looks pretty good.”

“Yeah, next goes the mosaic. We can think about bringing in the cross by maybe four o’clock.”

He paused, skeptically considering my revised schedule. “Let’s forget about four o’clock. Why don’t you guys join us for supper at five, and then work on the cross after that?”

Their kitchen serves not only the Seminary staff, but also that of the lay college, St. Mary’s, and the parochial high school. Orchard Lake St. Mary’s teams perennially challenge for the Class C Michigan State Basketball championship. Catholicism and basketball.

With the triptych complete, Our Lady of Czestowa secure in her place of honor bridging the central columns, we walked to the refectory for Friday fast. They fast well. Stuffed salmon with baby carrots. Suppertime afforded us our only relaxation of the day talking shop, pondering deadlines, and planning the elevation of the cross.

By seven in the evening, we were the only crew on site, except for Ron Anderson, the much harried construction supervisor. A wiry guy with the vestiges of a Kentucky twang who still smokes Camels. Long before supper, he had offered to stay and help us lift the cross in exchange for us returning tomorrow to help him finish the remainder of the Chapel before Sunday. Ron climbed up the scaffolding with our Mike, and then he climbed a ladder above the scaffold to loop a chain around a temporary beam that the window crew had run across the center of the cupola forty-five feet above the floor. While they lowered a pulley from the chain, Rame, Ian, Ken and I brought Jesus in from the truck. We laid him down near the center of the floor still wrapped. Monsignor Milewski led a group of ten or a dozen priests and seminarians into the chapel behind the pews and near the cross where I began cutting the duct tape to loosen the wrappings.

The covers were not off an instant before the Monsignor strode forward, knelt, and kissed Jesus' left hand, the nearest part of the figure to him. Still kneeling, gazing at the figure's face, he spoke softly in Polish and then stood back keeping his eyes on the crucifix. One by one with whispered prayers priest after priest bowed and knelt and made his veneration. As each took his turn and stepped on, they formed a rough circle around the cross. Young Father Tim, Monsignor Milewski's successor as Seminary leader, an Irishman among Poles, led the makeshift assembly in prayer. Some words they spoke in unison, a low quiet litany followed by Father Tim's words of praise and thanksgiving ringing through the silent walls.

Seeing all this, I had taken a moment or two outside to myself. Father Frank, the Seminary Chancellor joined me, and after a few silent steps together, solicitously offered, "A little choked up?"

"A little choked up."

When I returned, Monsignor Milewski gave me a bear hug and a kiss. I would get the same treatment on Saturday from Gus when he came by for his final inspection.

We went back to work. Rame gluing forty carved thorns into Jesus' crown. Ian gluing three carved nail heads into Jesus' hands and feet covering the real bolts that fastened figure to cross. I bolted hardware custom designed and welded by Russ Tracey to the top of the cross. This concatenation of iron would suspend the entire crucifix from the four guy wires we had set in place earlier in the afternoon. With the glue set and the bolts turned tight we stood up the cross, hooked it to the pulley, hoisted it up and had it in place by eight o'clock. Up on the scaffold, Mike removed the pulley, made minor adjustments to the hanging hardware and the cross hung plumb. Ron and Mike took down the chain hoist, climbed down the scaffold, dismantling it as they went passing the parts to us on the floor.

Emptied now of construction gear and workmen, the chapel was filled only with late summer twilight and the trinity complete, the wood carved son suspended between the stained glass father and Holy Ghost.

We spent twelve uneven hours on Saturday installing the final furnishings in the Chapel-- altar, ambo, presider's chair, credence table, tabernacle, confessional screens, font, two commemorative plaques, a stained glass panel, and a dozen and more candle sconces and vigil lamps that materialized with each successive appearance of the chief liturgist, Father Kryssa. When we left that night, all was prepared for consecration. Like any good job when it is finished, the chapel looked as if it had always been as it is.

Sunday morning the modest new chapel welcomed nearly two hundred celebrants. We followed Cardinal Maida in procession, stopping for a farewell ceremony in the old chapel before circumambulating and then entering the new. The pews seated a hundred and twenty. The remainder lined the walls and filled the aisles. A score and more of white robed Seminarians and green clad deacons joined the laity, architect, tradesmen,

and artists. Cardinal Maida performed the rites of consecration—baptizing with water and christening with oil the building itself and then separately anointing and censing the altar—the altar, in Catholic symbolic parlance nothing less than Christ, himself. The altar top, an inlaid cross of oak on oak glistened under holy oil diligently applied by the Cardinal himself. When a linen cloth had been laid over the oiled altar, he celebrated the Chapel’s first mass, joyous and song-filled.

Afterward we repaired to the refectory for a Polish feast, joyous and song-filled. A long, happy day made happier because most of my immediate family had traveled to join Karen and me. My Michigan sister Anne, my Florida sisters Kathy, Martha, Amy and her husband Scott with their children Lauren and Alexander, and brother George and his wife, Jean.

On Monday we buried our mother. Her long travail through Alzheimer’s had ended in a still July predawn with Kathy, Martha, and Amy at her side. We timed the interment of her cremated remains to fall on the day after the consecration, so that we could all share in the unveiling of George’s and my work before we discharged our last chore for mom.

Our Priest from St. Nicholas Ann Arbor, Father John, sang the Trisagion at her graveside, in Greek, the only language she spoke until she began kindergarten in Roaring Twenties Detroit. We covered the ground of her grave, which she now shares for eternity with her husband, Alexander, and their first child, Raymond, we covered it with an embroidered linen sampler she had made as a teenager. Flowers, birds, butterflies, and vines— every color of silk thread— sewn with such perfection of stichery that you can barely tell the front from the back.

It had been to my mother that my thoughts— if they could be considered thoughts— had turned in those bleary-eyed minutes when the priests had first seen Jesus. Sometimes, in those moments between moments while I work, and I actually see my hands— Jesus’ hands— at work coaxing steel through wood, I see my mother’s hands, slender, long, and strong. Deft, swift, sure, pushing and pulling needle and thread, leaving beauty in their wake.