

Bringing the Word of God to the People: *Sacred Iconography & Church Design of Ade Bethune*

Ade Bethune's drawings in the *Catholic Worker* brought interest in her work and led to her first commission for a church. Gradually the circle of those familiar with her work increased and she received further commissions from churches throughout the United States, as well as Canada, Mexico, and the Philippines. Ms. Bethune felt strongly in the power of art to instruct, to supplement the spoken and silent words of worship. Her designs are clear and direct, relating in purpose, and often in style, to the iconography of the early Christian Church.



Silkscreen on wood panels of Madonna and Christ the Teacher, used in several of Ade Bethune's later churches



Ade Bethune and local workers, St. Joseph's Church, the Philippines

Ms. Bethune viewed her role of teacher to be equally as important as that of artist. She used her art to instruct in the liturgy, while she herself instructed in art. As she had done with murals painted in several Catholic Worker houses, on many of her early projects Ms. Bethune instructed the people of each parish, both adults and children, in art-making. Portions of her designs were executed by the parishioners themselves. She felt it was important for them to feel a sense of connection to and ownership of the art in their church.

Ade Bethune did not just create art for these churches, however. When she became involved with a church she contributed her ideas about the liturgy and how it should be supported, not just by the church's art, but by its layout as well. In 1954 she published an article, "Font and Altar," in *The Catholic Art Quarterly*, describing different churches that she'd worked on. In an interview Ms. Bethune told David Ramsey, "That article gave my complaints about why a church was built wrong, . . . how it should be planned for better liturgical procedure, . . . have better movement. This was all pre-Vatican II. But what I didn't realize was the power of the printed word. And by these ideas being printed, I became an instant authority." More and more, people who contacted Ms. Bethune about their churches didn't want only her art, they wanted her ideas as well. Without planning to, she had become a liturgical consultant.

When clients asked her advice, they often received more than they had bargained for. In her biography of Ade Bethune, Sr. Judith Stoughton wrote, "Anyone asking Ade's advice had better be prepared for some serious study and dialogue! But the rewards are custom-fitted reports and sketches, filled with information and insights unavailable in any library or bookstore."

Ade Bethune received numerous awards and recognitions for her liturgical art. The men who built the first church she worked on presented her with a cross they carved from the same wood used in the church. Several universities have granted her honorary doctorates, including the University of Rhode Island. She has also received awards from the New England Liturgical Committee and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions.

This exhibition shows art from several of Ade Bethune's church commissions, from her first to one of her last, spanning almost 60 years.

St. Paulinus, Clairton, Pennsylvania

Ade Bethune's first church commission came in January, 1936, when Father Joseph Lonergan wrote asking if she would "consider making us a set of Stations of the Cross." He had seen the Way of the Cross designs she had done for the *Catholic Worker*, and wanted to reproduce them in his new church, St. Paulinus, outside of Pittsburgh. The parishioners had been using a high school auditorium for Mass for 13 years, and wanted their own church. However, during the Depression there was no money available to hire an architect or builder, so they decided to do it themselves. An engineer in the parish designed the steel roof trusses; the stone came from a local quarry and an abandoned bridge pier; the tile roof was bought at a sheriff's sale; and the lumber was from old buildings and boats. In addition to the Stations of the Cross, Ms. Bethune was commissioned to create many other artworks and furnishings for the church.



Pages from Ade Bethune's sketchbook showing her designs for two of the St. Paulinus crucifixes.



Preliminary sketch for St. Joseph statue

The first works she created for St. Paulinus were three wood crucifixes showing Christ as King, Christ as Priest, and Christ as Victim. Later she carved statues of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, depicting Joseph as he was, wearing a carpenter's apron and holding his saw. She included an adz, square, and mallet at the sides. Of the statues, Fr. Lonergan wrote to Ms. Bethune, "I am delighted with them. The[y] tell the story that you want to tell and that I want told. They tell it like the parables of the gospel. They speak with the directness & honesty of a child."

In addition to woodcarving, Ms. Bethune created the rose window and two stained glass lancets for the baptistry. She also designed and painted 24 panels for the sanctuary depicting saints and angels. At 8 feet high, these panels continued the simple design of the statues, this time in bold liturgical colors. The size and color of the panels was chosen by Father Lonergan to offset the dark wood walls, but the style suited Ms. Bethune as well. It continued her idea of depicting the saints simply, and foreshadowed her later interest in the iconographic style of the Eastern churches.

Through their skill and labor the building belonged to them—she wanted the art to be theirs as well. She gave lessons in woodcarving to several men, and the youth of the parish painted the backgrounds of the masonite panels.

"When Father Lonergan said, 'They don't know anything about art,' Ade replied, 'Oh, art is the bunk. I can teach them.' And she did so."

From *Our House of the Lord 1937-1987*, The Church of St. Paulinus parish directory

St. Joseph Church, Victorias Milling Company, Occidental Negros, the Philippines

In 1950, Ade Bethune received her second church commission, this time for St. Joseph Church, built for the workers and families of Victorias Milling Company sugar processing plant. The church had been built out of concrete and she was asked to decorate the exterior. She had intended to create paintings, but originally gave up the idea due to the climate. Instead, with local help, she used mosaic for the facade, creating three scenes from the life of St. Joseph: his marriage to the Virgin Mary, the workshop of Nazareth, and his death. The mosaics were made from broken-up bottles and china that were donated by the Filipinos. She chose her themes to



Ade Bethune with the marriage of Joseph mosaic



Above: St. Joseph Church, with the sugar cane mill in the background to the right

Below: Church façade mosaics: Nazareth workshop on left and death of St. Joseph on right



who look Filipino, and the humor shown in the Prodigal Son, who is shown in a slick car in front of a nightclub.

speak to the people. She wrote, "I figured it should not hurt the poor women tramping along the road with bags of rice on their heads, or the railroad crews rolling up and down with trainloads of [sugar] cane, to be cheered by images of marriage, work, and a happy death!"

Other mosaic scenes on the exterior depict the Epiphany and the Christ Child teaching the Doctors. In addition, Ms. Bethune created an interior mosaic for the baptistry.

Later, once a suitable medium had been found, she added paintings to the exterior as well. For the sanctuary wall she created scenes of the Last Supper and Pentecost; on the outside of the confessional she depicted the story of the Prodigal Son. Her concern with having her art speak to the people who would see it is evident in her Christ and Mary,



Detail of the Last Supper

Church of San Joachin, Bacalar, Yucatan



Father Donald Hessler, a Maryknoll priest Ade Bethune had known since he was a seminarian, wrote her in 1951 asking, "Can you make walls speak?" He was at his mission in southern Yucatan where the previous priest had restored the 400-year-old Spanish church, and he wanted Ms. Bethune's help in decorating the white-washed walls. She went to Bacalar later that year and began by painting deer thirsting for the living waters around the sacristy door. Above the door she painted a text from the Psalms and the Last Supper. In a

niche at the rear of the church she placed the church's statue of San Joachin and painted two "imaginary" statues to accompany it—the seated Virgin and Child, and St. Anne shown as a Mayan grandmother.

She returned to the Yucatan in 1954, this time to decorate the newly built baptistry, using mosaic on the outside walls and fresco scenes on the interior.



The Baptism of Our Lord fresco

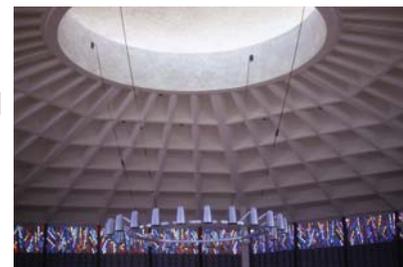
In addition to Bacalar, Fr. Hessler was responsible for 10 outlying mission villages in the Yucatan. He asked for Ms. Bethune's help designing a church that could be adapted for these villages. The model she provided had a cruciform layout, allowing for sufficient space while requiring no more than a 20-foot span, the limit the local people could build. The entrance featured the font, while the sacristy was in the arm opposite the entrance. The altar was placed in the center, under a cupola for light, with pews in the crossing arms. In front of the entrance was an aljibe, or cistern, for collecting rainwater.

St. Leo's Church, St. Paul, Minnesota

One of the first churches for which Ade Bethune served as liturgical consultant was St. Leo's, for which she was hired in 1960. It contained many of the features she viewed as important, including a central altar, plenty of natural light from the oculus and the



clerestory windows, and placement of the baptistry between the narthex and the nave. Near the beginning of the process, she sent two models of alternative schemes for the church to Father Bernard Murray, along with this caution, "I would suggest you show both models, even though you may prefer one of them. . . . If you present only one model, it is alone to absorb all the criticism, and as a result, its condemnation is almost assured. . . . The best situation is if you can join with the critic in criticizing the unwanted model and promise to make necessary changes in the one that becomes 'accepted' as a result."



Oculus and clerestory windows, Church of St. Leo

St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church, Troy, New York

This church, dedicated in 1983, is another example of a project in which Ade Bethune addressed all aspects. By this point in her career, she was knowledgeable not just about a variety of art mediums, but also about the requirements of acoustics, lighting, furniture, floor layout, and landscaping, and how they would best serve the liturgical purpose and needs of the church.



Site model and floor plan for St. Michael's

Ade Bethune was hired as a consultant in designing and building a new St. Michael's after the old church burned. Designs for the building itself, its interior layout, and its location on the site went through several iterations. Working with the parish and the diocese a final plan was approved. As part of the plan, Ms. Bethune developed a "Program for Sacred Images and Symbols" laying out the

iconographic scheme for the church and chapel in appliqué tapestries, stained glass, sculpture, and furnishings. In the church, images depict the Mystery of Christ and the Church. The south wall, focusing on the Redemptive Death of Christ, features a stained glass window of Jesus Transfigured before His Disciples. The west wall shows the Glorification of Christ and the Church, including a stained glass representation of the Ascension and Mystery of the Trinity.

Cathedral of St. Paul, St. Paul, Minnesota

When Ade Bethune made her first visit to the St. Kate's in 1939 she also lectured at the St. Paul Seminary. Fifty years later one of the students was pastor at the Cathedral of St. Paul. That priest, Msgr. Ambrose Hayden, wrote to her asking if she was still active as an artist, and would she design a mosaic to fill a false window opening in the baptistry of the Cathedral. The mosaic, featuring the Baptism of Christ, was completed in 1990, the year of the Cathedral's 75th Jubilee.

"We know that ninety per cent of what we learn comes in through the eyes. If you're in a church, even with very beautiful lines, but all that you look at is a wall of bricks, you will only get so much from the bricks. Because you're not going to look at the priest at the altar the whole time, you're going to look at those bricks also. Your eyes will have to rest somewhere and if they can rest on sacred images . . . , then that is silent speech. It is a picture, something of contemplation. . . .

In the wake of Vatican II, . . . people started throwing out plaster statues and putting up felt and burlap so-called banners. And so for lack of imagination or something, they were only quotations. So, 'Quotation Quotation Quotation Quotation Quotation' all around the wall! Each one very good in itself. But they are essentially distracting and disturbing because they are *words* and they compete with the word spoken in the liturgy.

If you have a picture with no letters, maybe only the name of the person, then it does not disturb you from the point of view of words. It is just something that can come in there and it will blend itself. If it is done in a universal enough manner, it will blend in with all kinds of spoken words. It's a silent speech, a thing for meditation."

Ade Bethune, interview conducted by David Ramsey, April 25, 1986