

When I came to St. Peter in 2005, we had water problems with the church and especially the walkways. Fr. Joe had started working on this before I came, and soon after I came we finally found someone who was able to correct the problem, at least for a while, by sealing the roof again and putting vinyl as a ceiling to the walkways. A few years later we started to have water problems again especially where the flat roof joined the west wall of the church.

In the fall of 2010 we started talking with some designers and contractors concerning the problems with the church building. The first was the water problem. We also talked about removing the popcorn ceiling, putting in new flooring and taking out the overhang above the altar. It housed old speakers we no longer use. Removing it would give some additional height to the sanctuary. We also considered an enlarged entrance as a transition from outside to the inside of the church. This was both to provide a more hospitable place out of the weather before and after Mass and to allow for a decent sized interior transition space before entering the church proper.

I had begun suffering from Myasthenia Gravis in 2007 and it was mostly a minor issue until January of 2011. I had a severe case of it in my throat, which greatly affected my ability to speak and eat for about three months. Before I was able to receive treatment leading to a much better controlled situation with Myasthenia, Bishop Ricard resigned in March of 2011. Both of these situations put dealing with the church on hold.

Bishop Parkes was ordained in June of 2012 and was here for Confirmation in April 2013. Those who have been here know that because our Bishop is very tall, he has a difficult time maneuvering in the sanctuary and has to duck even to get inside the church. I was allowing him time to get somewhat settled in the diocese before I approached him about possible renovations to the church building. When he was here for Confirmation I said, "Bishop, if you let me do something with the church, I'll make sure you can get into the building!" He gave me permission to continue to look into it further.

In the mean time we continued remedial work on the flat roof on the west side of the church to stop the leaks. The past leaking had caused mold to develop in the outside storage rooms and also in the SW closet in the church due to relatively frequent water intrusion. We couldn't deal with the mold problem effectively until we are able to get the leak stopped. We thought we had it fixed until the hard freeze in January of 2014 which was followed by torrential rains, and we again had water intrusion. This time it was not only along the west wall, but under the stained glass windows and under all the doors.

We needed to find out the extent of what we were dealing with in the church building. In the summer and fall of 2013 I had begun speaking with the diocese about engineers and architects they would recommend to help us with this project. After reviewing them I really didn't think, based on past work, they would capture the direction I felt we should go.

The older I get the less I believe in coincidence and the more I see the providential hand of God. For example, when we were ready to do some interior and exterior work on the church and roofs, I came down with a severe Myasthenia attack and process stopped for a time. In the interim we discovered more serious problems with the flat roofs.

In July of 2013 I came across a book by Duncan Stroik, [The Church Building as a Sacred Place: Beauty, Transcendence and the Eternal](#). The author is a professor of Architecture at Notre Dame. It looked very interesting and I bought a copy of the book. It is an excellent book. He basically advocates that we need to move in the direction of restoring architectural principles in our church buildings that have been part of the Catholic tradition for centuries.

I felt we should move in the direction the book spoke of when we did any kind of work in our church building. I showed the book to Bishop Parkes and he was in agreement. He commented that we need to build our churches such that we don't have to renovate them every 30-40 years.

In the book, there is a chapter entitled: Building or Renovating the House of God: Advice to Pastors and Laity. I met with the Pastoral Council in November and we discussed the direction outlined by this chapter.

One of his suggestions was to make sure you have the right architect. It is better to have the right architect to guide the project than to have an architect that is close by. Not satisfied with local architects, I emailed Duncan Stroik on December 12, telling him what I was thinking and asked if there was any architect in the SE part of the US who was schooled in his approach to restoring beauty, transcendence and the eternal to churches.

He told me that one of his best students is in Santa Rosa Beach, Braulio (Leo) Casas, and he urged me to contact him, which I did. He was very interested in helping us. There is also an additional architect who has recently graduated from Notre Dame who works for his firm, Philip Rhea.

Leo came to look over our church and campus on December 27. He told me his approach is to preserve and make use of whatever is possible in existing structures until such time as it is not good stewardship in terms of finances, time and effort. We discussed a range of possibilities from renovating our present church building to remodeling the Parish Center into a church building to building new if neither of the first two possibilities was good stewardship in terms of feasibility.

At the Pastoral Council meeting in January of 2014 I told them the architect had visited and that we had permission from the Bishop to explore possibilities. The Pastoral Council agreed that we should pursue a proposal from the architect.

During the months of January and February of 2014 a proposal was created. I discussed the proposal with the Pastoral Council and the council was in favor of proceeding. I discussed the proposal with the Finance Committee and they agreed that we should spend up to the \$10,000 limit contained in the proposal. I signed the proposal in March of 2014 to engage the architectural firm to review our Church and Parish Center in terms of issues to be dealt with regarding our present church building.

A further analysis of the building was done and the architect sent us a [report of his findings](#). The issues and possible remedies to the issues were things we were aware of already. If you read the report you will see issues were 1) erosion of soil adjacent to structures, 2) collection of

ground water between church and parish center with evidence of sidewalk damage due to settling, which may also affect the foundation of the Parish Center, 3) failure of the flat roof about the storage area allowing water to penetrate into the storage area and the church promoting the growth of mold, 4) shingle roof of the church shows excessive pitting and wear, and 5) HVAC system shows sign of moisture and mold.

There was hope that we might be able to raise the ceiling in our present church building and add an extension to the front to provide a more welcoming gathering space before entering the Church along with dealing with the other issues. After an [engineering review](#) it was determined that the ceiling could not be raised without removing or modifying the exterior roof system, in part or in whole, involving considerable amounts of structural calculations and labor intensive reconstruction.

We asked the architect to begin working within the above constraints to design a possibility for dealing with the problems in the present church building while moving in the direction of including architectural designs that have been part of the Catholic tradition for centuries.

Paul Johansen and I met with the architect on May 8th of this year and he presented us with some initial drawings. Both Paul and I were very pleased with the direction. It was almost like a Phoenix arising out of the ashes.

Two days later I showed the drawings to the Pastoral Council and they were pleased and excited about the direction. That evening I emailed the drawings to Bishop Parkes. The following day he stopped by my office in the Pastoral Center. We talked briefly about the drawings. He asked if we were going to re-christen our church, St. Peter Basilica. When he was leaving my office for a meeting he said, *"I think it is beautiful and I would like to see it happen."*

The [Design Analysis](#) for this project stated the objective as renovating the existing church in such a manner that recaptures some of the enduring architectural designs that have been part of the Catholic history for centuries. Some concerns with our present building in meeting that objective are that our present church does not really express a sense of the sacred; there are engineering constraints and issues of cost effectiveness of modifying the existing roof trusses; and that the church does not really express a sense of presence or entry. As an aside concerning this last issue, there are times when guests have come to the office asking which building is our church.

Some of the remedies to the concerns that the [initial floor plan](#) provides are these. 1) The plan redefines the nave to incorporate a new, taller roof. 2) The addition of a narthex and bell tower gives the church a sense of presence in the neighborhood and will provide a sense of entry. At the present time our main door entry is really like coming in the side door of the building. 3) The plan allows for slight increase on seating. The present church will seat 270 comfortably. The proposed plan will seat 300 comfortably. It also allows for an addition 140 to stand in the much larger aisles and provides 12 seats for the cry room. 4) The addition of an apse will elevate the sense of the sacred and the focus on the liturgy.

During the course of this journey, Fr. John Cayer, a friend of mine, suggested I watch a BBC

series called Pilgrimage with Simon Reeve since many of the places we have visited on our own vacations or pilgrimages were in this series.

In one session Simon was in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, one of the most magnificent churches built in its time. He told the story of a Russian Prince who was trying to decide whether to become Christian, Jewish or Muslim. He sent emissaries out to investigate and report back to him. One group entered Hagia Sophia and sent back the report that when they walked inside they felt like they had walked into heaven. Then Simon Reeve said, "Never underestimate the power of a building to generate intense feelings." That captured what I would like to see in our church - a building which would generate a strong sense of the sacred.

We have two options - renovate existing church and stay with structure, or move in direction of drawings. When I presented this to the parish at our picnic on June 20th and again after all the masses on the weekend of June 28-29, the direction of the drawings was well received and there was an excitement about the possibilities contained in the drawings. The consensus was that we continue along this path and work toward a reasonable budget estimate and a timeline so we can make a decision about the future.

We will address the issues in the present buildings in such a manner as to effectively deal with the concerns in the short turn in order to give us time to pray about and fully investigate a new direction concerning our church building. As this develops I will be making some presentations that will look more deeply into the enduring architectural designs that have existed in our Catholic tradition for centuries.

Most important is to accompany this process with prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. [Cards with a recommended prayer are available in the church and are also on this webpage.](#) I ask that all parishioners pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we discern where God is calling us.

Fr. Paul White, Pastor