

Fr. Sorin's Liturgical Crown Jewel: The Basilica of the Sacred Heart High Altar**Connor Patrick****Publication Date**

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Fr. Sorin's Liturgical Crown Jewel: The Basilica of the Sacred Heart High Altar

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the campus of the University of Notre Dame stands tall as a symbol of the university's Catholic history and identity. Upon stepping foot inside the main doors of the church, visitors are instantly captivated and awestruck by the beauty and magnificence of the sacred space. Despite being one of the earliest buildings at a college that was founded with rather miniscule financial capacity, the basilica and its furnishings would suggest otherwise. Beautiful paintings, stained glass windows, Stations of the Cross, and much more provide the church with a sense of grandeur. One of the main furnishings that adds to this encounter with the beautiful is the basilica's high altar. The high altar is unique and seems to depart from the common practice at the time in American Catholic churches of installing mainly marble high altars directly against the apse of a church or cathedral. The framework for analyzing artifacts provided by Jules David Prown in "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" will allow us to further explore the history of the high altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, specifically through Prown's three distinct analytical steps of description, deduction, and speculation.

I. A Brief History of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart

The Basilica of the Sacred Heart is the main church on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, and is administered by the Congregation of Holy Cross. While a different church

originally occupied the site just west of the Main Building, Fr. Edward Sorin C.S.C. – the founder of the university – and others within the congregation soon sought a larger church for the young campus. Renowned architect Patrick Keely devised plans for a new church, which Fr. Sorin sought to model after the Church of the Gesù in Rome, but the estimated cost of its construction would total \$100,000 – money that Fr. Sorin did not have. Thus, Fr. Sorin assembled an in-house team, consisting of himself, Fr. Alexis Granger C.S.C., and Br. Charles Borromeo Harding C.S.C. to oversee the planning and building of the new church. The foundation was laid in the spring of 1870, with the first Mass taking place in the still-unfinished building in 1875. The new church was finally consecrated in 1888, the year of Fr. Sorin’s golden jubilee of priesthood. The steeple at the front of the building was completed in 1892. Approximately 100 years later, in January of 1992, Pope St. John Paul II elevated the church to the status of “Minor Basilica,” a great honor for the church and for the university overall. The church was constructed in the Gothic style, highly reflective of the Congregation of Holy Cross’ French roots.

II. Description of the High Altar

The first step in Prown’s three-step framework is description, wherein the dimensions, weight, materials, condition, color, texture, and more must be considered. The high altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart is a towering artifact, dominating the sanctuary of the church. It is truly a focal point for visitors sitting in the main body of the church, the nave. Sources confirm that Fr. Sorin commissioned the French designer Froc-Robert to create the church’s new high altar in the 1870s.¹ The basilica high altar appears to be made of gold; written evidence even

¹ Thomas Schlereth, “Arts and Artists of Word and Music,” in *A Spire of Faith: The University of Notre Dame’s Sacred Heart Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Alumni Association, 1991), 25.

confirms that the aim of the original designer of the altar, in collaboration with Fr. Sorin, was that the altar would be “flowing with gold.”² However, the high altar is actually made of bronze: “the base of the altar is fashioned like a shrine, the sides composed of two arcades of bronze.”³ A few ornamentations featured on the altar are not bronze but are instead painted, such as the small doors of the tabernacle itself (which are primarily blue) and the statues of various angels and disciples (of varying colors). The altar glistens in the natural light of the stained glass windows as well as the artificial light provided by light fixtures, and appears to be quite smooth and shiny. The altar consists of the altar “table”, the rectangular portion on which Mass can be celebrated, as well as an actual tower for the tabernacle. The entire altar is crafted in a French Gothic style, fitting for the overall Gothic style of the church. The “table” portion of the altar consists of mini arches, with niches at various points for small statues of saints. Inside the altar table itself are boxes of relics of saints, covered in a red tarp.

The tower for the tabernacle is an extraordinary feature, and is highly decorated with small statues of angels, various “doors”, and above all, a statue of a lamb. The tower appears to be a sort of mini building itself, truly reminiscent of an actual tower or spire. One written analysis of the high altar describes how the tabernacle is fashioned like “a holy city, earthly yet celestial, ascending but also descending. As with any medieval city, it is walled and has ample turrets and battlements...”⁴ The author, historian Thomas Schlereth, continues:

Each of its 12 gates is guarded by an angel wielding a lance. Twelve enamelled plates bear the names of the Tribes of Israel. The City’s walls have twelve foundations, on which are found the names of the 12 Apostles, eight of whom are also depicted in inlay images on the tabernacle’s walls. Twelve precious stones, emblems of the 12 fruits of the

² “The Main Altar,” Basilica of the Sacred Heart Museum Records.

³ “A Description of the Altar and Tabernacle for the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,” 1876, Notre Dame Printed Materials Collection (hereafter cited as PNDP) 10-Sb-3, University of Notre Dame Archives (hereafter cited as UNDA).

⁴ Schlereth, “Arts and Artists of Word and Music,” 25.

Tree of Life, are set in each of the tabernacle's doors. The Lamb of God, a symbol used throughout Sacred Heart, crowns the city and, in turn, is canopied by a Gothic spire.⁵

The tabernacle tower is flanked on each side by three large candlesticks, for a total of six candlesticks – the traditional arrangement of Catholic altars prior to the Second Vatican Council. The altar is situated on five wooden steps, with the top of the fifth step being covered in a fine reddish stone; these steps rise above the sanctuary, which itself is already a few steps above the nave floor. One can approach the altar by the steps on all sides of the structure. The entire structure appears to weigh a considerable amount, and appears to reach a height of nearly half that of the basilica nave itself. It should be noted that no other object within the basilica rises even close to this height from the ground. For being such an old object within the church and at the university overall, the high altar appears to be in immaculate condition.

III. Deduction

The second step in Prown's analysis is that of deduction, which explores sensory engagement, intellectual engagement, and emotional responses. Right when one walks in the main doors of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, they find themselves staring down the center aisle of the nave, and ultimately, one's eyes are led to the high altar. Sensory engagement beyond sight is rather limited for this artifact, especially as the sanctuary itself is normally roped off to non-clerics – and the high altar itself is always roped off to non-clerics. This being said, the high altar dominates the sanctuary and the basilica overall and immediately captures the minds of those who enter inside the building. If I were looking at the high altar for the first time, and if I did not already have an understanding of what a high altar's purpose is, I would deduce that its prominent place in the sanctuary is not an accident and serves some sort of purpose. One would

⁵ Schlereth, "Arts and Artists of Word and Music," 25-26.

naturally deduce that there must be a reason that the altar is situated on the main axis of the church, is made of such seemingly high-quality materials, and truly towers over the other objects of the sanctuary and nave. Research into the Catholic Mass, particularly the pre-Vatican II “Tridentine Mass”, confirms the importance of the high altar within the liturgical space. *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* confirms that the high altar is the “main altar of a church sited on the main axis at the east of the choir or chancel.”⁶ *The Catholic Encyclopedia* also states that “the high altar, being the chief place for the enactment of the sacrificial function, is to be prominent not only by its position but also by the richness of its material and ornamentation. Apart from the liturgical part of the Mass, it serves as the repository for the Eucharistic Presence and becomes the centre of all the more solemn parochial functions of the year.”⁷

The steps surrounding the structure on all sides indicate that priests and other religious people would ascend to the altar itself, facing towards the altar and tabernacle table and directing onlookers’ attention to the altar. I also would deduce that there are reasons – particularly religious reasons – explaining the various elements of the altar’s design, such as the relics of saints, statues of angels, the golden lamb, the “doors” on the tower, and more. Written evidence confirms that this is true: the archpriest of Clermont, France, wrote that the basilica’s “Tabernacle is the rendition in gold and jewels of the XXIst and XXIIId Chapter of the Apocalypse... it is indeed the Holy City – the New Jerusalem.”⁸ The archpriest continues: “Let us lovingly salute the crowning piece of the work, the Lamb triumphing, at the top of the city...

⁶ James Stevens Curl and Susan Wilson, “high-altar” in *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, last modified 2015, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.nd.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199674985.001.0001/acref-9780199674985-e-2256>.

⁷ Augustin Joseph Schulte, “High Altar,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

⁸ “A Description of the Altar and Tabernacle for the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,” 1876, PNDP 10-Sb-3, UNDA.

it is indeed the Lamb which has been sacrificed: *Dignum est Agnus qui occisus est accipere coronam*. He bears the standard of royalty, and on His head the cruciform nimbus... the Altar of Notre Dame recalls the liturgical phases through which the Catholic altar has passed.”⁹

The altar elicits a strong emotional response from congregants when they enter the basilica, providing an additional “wow factor” that adds to the grandeur of the basilica. The high altar is one of the aspects that many most associate with the basilica, and it forms an integral part of the liturgical space as well as people’s understanding of that liturgical space.

IV. Speculation

The final stage for Prown is speculation, to review the previous steps, formulate a hypothesis, and create a program for validation or research. I would speculate that when the high altar was installed in the basilica, the priests of the Congregation of Holy Cross were very proud and very excited about its central placement – really, dominance – in the church. Fr. Sorin and his fellow priests and brothers surely would have understood the significance of the various features of the tabernacle tower, especially its scriptural basis. I would speculate that they wanted to project an image of the church and of the university, and that this high altar – the dominant structure one sees when entering the main doors – was, in their eyes, to serve as the focal point of that projection. The altar lends to an understanding of grandeur, of beauty, and of wealth. There must be a reason that the priests of the congregation sought a literal tower for their tabernacle and high altar, and one made of intricate bronze, as opposed to what was much more commonplace at the time throughout the United States with high altars made of marble with reredos usually featuring a painting or crucifix. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that many

⁹ “A Description of the Altar and Tabernacle for the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,” 1876, PNDP 10-Sb-3, UNDA.

were fond of the altar Fr. Sorin commissioned for Sacred Heart. The aforementioned archpriest of Clermont, France wrote that “the great features are the altar and the tabernacle in the centre. The altar represents the human heart in the human body. It is a grand work of art from France.”¹⁰ Perhaps those early C.S.C. fathers were right about it becoming a focal point for the university; just this past Christmas, for example, the ornament widely distributed by the Notre Dame Alumni Association pictured the basilica high altar.

Additionally, I would speculate that the sheer size of intricate scriptural symbolism of the high altar lends itself toward the action that occurs on the altar or what is housed inside the tabernacle: the high altar appears not simply to be an ornate decoration, but something to be ascended (hence the steps), utilized (both the table component and the repository of the tabernacle), learned from (in the various details of the tower taken from Apocrypha), and more. However, the high altar is not to be directly used by all, but by a select few; I would speculate that the altar being roped off on all sides is a sign that the altar truly is of significant value, both monetarily and sentimentally, so the basilica staff and Congregation of Holy Cross seeks to preserve the altar as much as possible for future generations. An appraisal of the Church of the Sacred Heart found in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart Museum’s records from 1937 places the value of the altar as the third-most-expensive artifact in the entire church – at \$15,000 – behind only the chimes in the steeple (\$50,000) and the entirety of the church’s wooden pews (\$18,315).¹¹

Interestingly, archival information has presented a number of inconsistencies regarding the high altar’s history. For example, sources such as early 20th century basilica pamphlets state

¹⁰ “A Description of the Altar and Tabernacle for the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,” 1876, PNDP 10-Sb-3, UNDA.

¹¹ An appraisal of Notre Dame’s Sacred Heart Church and Sacristy, 1937, Basilica of the Sacred Heart Museum Records.

that the altar was originally designed for – and resided in – the Church of St. Etienne in Beauvais, France, before being acquired by Fr. Sorin. However, this is flatly disproven by Sorin’s 1874 correspondence with the Froc-Robert shop in Paris, which shows that Sorin directly commissioned the altar from Froc-Robert.¹² While certain documents like these letters provide definitive answers to certain questions, other matters still remain unresolved. Certain sources, and even the Basilica’s website, state that the high altar was moved backwards in the sanctuary during the liturgical reforms of the 1960s following the Second Vatican Council.¹³ Photographic evidence suggests the contrary, and a comprehensive review of the alterations made to the church in the 1960s found in the Notre Dame Archives also suggests the contrary, implying that the high altar simply remained in its original position in the apse. For example, one publication to Notre Dame alumni stated that “the familiar tabernacle tower remains in its honored place on the main altar.”¹⁴ It is my estimation that the idea of the high altar being moved backwards is purely a legend, perhaps a misinterpretation of the basilica’s renovations on the part of pious clergy and laypeople alike attempting to bring the university fully in line with the directives of the post-conciliar Church. Finally, while early sources such as announcements from Fr. Granger indicate that a \$2,000 duty was required for the altar to enter the United States, later sources including the basilica pamphlets mentioned above claim that the altar was purchased duty-free at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Further research, such as a review of ledgers belonging to either the university or the congregation related to the Church of the Sacred Heart, would be very beneficial in solving this particular mystery.

V. Articulation of Notre Dame’s Values

¹² Schlereth, “Arts and Artists of Word and Music,” 25.

¹³ “History,” Basilica of the Sacred Heart, <https://basilica.nd.edu/about/history/>.

¹⁴ “Three-Phase Renovation Complete,” Notre Dame Alumnus, May 1969, PNDP 10-Sb-12, UNDA.

For much of the basilica's history, the high altar was the primary altar where the celebration of Mass took place, with the priest and people facing the same direction towards the altar and tabernacle in the ancient *ad orientem* ("towards the east") liturgical posture. While celebration of Mass facing east (whether true east or the symbolic east of the tabernacle) at high altars is largely no longer common practice in Latin Rite Catholicism today, with Mass facing towards the people at table altars now commonplace following the Second Vatican Council, the tabernacle atop the basilica's high altar still serves as the repository for the Eucharist when Mass is not taking place. From a theological standpoint, the altar and tabernacle are arguably the two most important artifacts inside every single Catholic church. Catholics believe that the Eucharist truly is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, based on Jesus' words in the Gospels: "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him."¹⁵ Church leaders have long stressed the centrality of the Eucharist to Catholicism, confirming at the Second Vatican Council that the Eucharist is the "the source and summit of the Christian life."¹⁶ This bestows a symbolic pride of place on the altar, where the Eucharist is celebrated, and the tabernacle, where the Eucharist is housed, in every Catholic church – including the basilica. Fr. Sorin articulated this theological significance to the university in an 1873 article in *The Scholastic*, preparing the university for the new high altar to ultimately be placed in the then-unfinished church: "The profound respect in which our Tabernacles are held finds its cause in our faith in the Real Presence they contain. We prostrate ourselves before Him who dwells there."¹⁷

¹⁵ John 6:54-56 (NIV).

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, "Vatican II Lumen Gentium on the Eucharist - Crossroads Initiative," Crossroads Initiative, July 1, 2016. <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/vatican-ii-lumen-gentium-on-the-eucharist/>.

¹⁷ Edward Sorin, "A New Tabernacle," *The Scholastic*, November 1, 1873.

Indeed, the high altar constitutes one of the most important aspects of the Basilica, serving as the primary focal point for the interior of the church. In a way, then, the high altar serves as the focal point of the faith life for the entire University of Notre Dame. From the very beginning, the altar was designed to convey a distinct message about Notre Dame to the surrounding world. One of the 1874 letters between Froc-Robert and Fr. Sorin in the Notre Dame Archives reveals that Sorin had sought to show off the altar at an upcoming exhibition in Paris, with Froc-Robert lamenting, “we regret our inability to get it ready for the exposition in Paris this coming year.”¹⁸ Perhaps this original desire of Sorin’s is how the altar ended up appearing at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, at which it won a prize for its design.¹⁹ This same letter also reveals that Fr. Sorin expressed a willingness to pay more money than initially intended – one might guess, based on Sorin’s financial history, that he may have offered more than he truly had at his disposal – for the designers in the Froc-Robert shop to add more intricate details to the design and “make the altar richer.”²⁰ Froc-Robert’s letter further notes Sorin’s “desire of putting the most costly work into the part of the tabernacle containing the Sacred Species.”²¹ It is undoubtedly clear that Fr. Sorin sought to send a message to the world that the fledgling Notre Dame, while wanting in resources and funding in reality, was to ultimately be a place of grandeur, beauty, and overall, religious devotion. That Sorin sought to show his new altar at an exposition in Europe or America indicates Sorin did not have a strictly Catholic audience in mind, either. One archival source, a written guide to the basilica, reveals that even into the 1960s the high altar was “widely sought after by museums such as the Metropolitan in

¹⁸ Froc-Robert to Very Rev. Father Sorin, 3 March 1874, Congregation of Holy Cross Indiana Province Records (hereafter cited as UIP) 5/7, UNDA.

¹⁹ “The Main Altar,” Basilica of the Sacred Heart Museum Records.

²⁰ Froc-Robert to Very Rev. Father Sorin, 3 March 1874, UIP 5/7, UNDA.

²¹ Froc-Robert to Very Rev. Father Sorin, 3 March 1874, UIP 5/7, UNDA.

New York as a show piece of period architecture”²² – perhaps a validation of Sorin’s great efforts to procure the most beautiful high altar possible for the university.

Nearly 150 years after its installation in the basilica, the high altar remains one of the central aspects of Notre Dame’s faith life, articulating a number of values about the university. The altar’s history and the prominent place it still retains in the basilica show how fundamental the Catholic faith is to the university. Over 100,000 people visit the basilica each year, and basilica staff members offer tours to visitors every day of the week except for Saturday. The University of Notre Dame is a place of religious pilgrimage, and the basilica’s high altar is the central focal point of this religious encounter. As Schlereth notes in his 1991 book *A Spire of Faith: The University of Notre Dame's Sacred Heart Church*, “The French Gothic high altar is an architectonic and artistic extravaganza. To the 19th-century Notre Dame community, it represented an epitome of the Gothic Revival.”²³ The Notre Dame Alumni Association’s selection of the high altar as the subject of their annual Christmas ornament in 2022 also reveals the high altar’s powerful lasting impact on the Notre Dame psyche. The Alumni Association writes the following of the high altar on their website: “From the gilded columns and arches of its base, to the embroidered Eucharistic vine of the altar table, to the towering golden edifice of the tabernacle, the High Altar draws the eye from all corners of the Basilica. This is only appropriate, for the altar serves as the locus of our worship of God at the Mass. It is a place of both sacrifice and celebration.”²⁴

Conclusion

²² “Sacred Heart Church,” 1960s, PNDP 10-Sb-3, UNDA.

²³ Schlereth, “Arts and Artists of Word and Music,” 25.

²⁴ “Notre Dame Christmas Ornament 2022,” Notre Dame Alumni & Friends, <https://my.nd.edu/page/ornament>.

The high altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart occupies a central place not only in the physical space of the church building, but in the faith life of the campus community overall.

From the very beginning of the church's construction, Fr. Sorin sought a high altar that would elicit a strong emotional and devotional response from believer and non-believer, from members of the university community and visiting pilgrims alike. The primacy it retains both inside the basilica nearly 150 years after its installation, as well as its status as a focal point of Notre Dame's Catholic identity, is a testament to Sorin's grand hopes for his university and the lasting values upheld by the university – namely, the centrality of the Catholic character of Notre Dame's identity from the very beginning all the way to the present.