

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

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Library Research Award Essay

This semester, I had the opportunity to take an incredible course called “Notre Dame and Its Artifacts” in the Department of Art, Art History & Design. The aim of the course was to study Notre Dame’s history from before our founding in 1842 all the way to the present day, but through a very unique lens: the artifacts of our campus. The buildings, spaces, and material objects across our campus all have unique stories of how and why they came to exist. For our final project, we were tasked with selecting an artifact somewhere on our campus and analyzing it through the framework provided by the American art historian Jules David Prown in his article “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method.” We have utilized the process he describes therein – description, deduction, and speculation – throughout the semester. We were then asked to research our artifact, and ultimately write about its history and the values it may articulate in the final paper.

I decided to write about the high altar of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart for my final project. I have been a volunteer in the basilica for most of my undergraduate experience at Notre Dame, and I now volunteer as a basilica tour guide as well. The high altar is a beautiful artifact, sitting along the church’s main axis and serving as the main focal point of the sanctuary. However, the fact that such an intricate religious object is located in the basilica is something I have always taken for granted. Its full history cannot be found by searching the internet, and even as a basilica tour guide, I did not initially know much about its history. The research goals of our course this semester prompted me to finally question the high altar’s place in the basilica. While the beautiful high altar might fit into the Notre Dame of today – where extravagance is not out of the ordinary – Fr. Sorin and the early leaders of the university had very little capital at their disposal for such a grandiose object. How did the high altar get to Notre Dame? Who

created it? What was Fr. Sorin's involvement in its development? How did people initially react to its grandiose design? These were all questions I sought to answer in conducting research into the high altar's history. The key to unlocking this mystery was, unquestionably, the resources at the Hesburgh Library – namely, the University of Notre Dame Archives and other print resources in circulation.

After searching to no avail for information on the internet and even via OneSearch, I contacted the Archives for guidance. Assistant Archivist Joe Smith responded to my inquiry, and pulled various folders related to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart for my review. I made a number of important discoveries even after just one visit to the Archives. The high altar was designed in the shop of Froc-Robert, who was described as an eminent Parisian liturgical arts designer of the era. The high altar was first brought to the Centennial Exposition in 1876 in Philadelphia, where it won a prize for its design. It is made of bronze, consisting of an altar table and a tabernacle “tower”; the tower was designed based on the description of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. Overall, I reviewed a number of documents that I was able to utilize in my final paper, such as an 1873 article by Fr. Sorin in *The Scholastic* explaining his desire for a grand new high altar, an 1876 description of the altar from a French priest, and a 1969 article describing the mid-century renovations made to the basilica overall.

At this stage in my research I was rather pleased, having learned many facts about the high altar that are not readily available. At the same time, however, I was puzzled. The sources I reviewed in the Archives contradicted each other in a few critical areas: the extent of Fr. Sorin's involvement in the high altar's design, how much Fr. Sorin paid for the altar, and whether the altar was moved backwards in the church during the 1960s as basilica tour guides – and even the basilica website – allege. I returned to OneSearch and broadened my inquiry, this time looking

for a book or article detailing the general history of the church as opposed to the high altar specifically. One promising source appeared: historian Thomas Schlereth's 1991 book *A Spire of Faith: The University of Notre Dame's Sacred Heart Church*. We had read a number of book chapters and articles by Schlereth throughout our course, so I was optimistic that I would find helpful information regarding the high altar in his book. Sure enough, the book contains a whole chapter devoted to the interior art and furnishings of the basilica, including the Froc-Robert high altar. While the chapter was not able to dispel the doubt of the high altar's purchase, Schlereth's book revealed one of the most pivotal discoveries of all: the existence of correspondence between Fr. Sorin and Froc-Robert directly. I initially did not believe any letters between them existed, as nothing from Froc-Robert was listed on the Edward Sorin Correspondence page of the Archives website, and yet, Schlereth made it clear that such correspondence existed.

I immediately emailed Joe Smith to try to locate these letters between Sorin and Froc-Robert, and sure enough, letters between the two were found in the Congregation of Holy Cross Indiana Province Records. I returned to the Archives and reviewed a long letter from Froc-Robert to Sorin from March 3, 1874, which provided an incredible amount of context regarding the altar's creation, Fr. Sorin's intentions for the high altar, and more. I also requested to view photos of the basilica as it looked before the renovations of the 1960s during this visit to the Archives. These sources provided a cascade of information regarding the high altar's history and answered nearly all of my initial research questions – and then some. My detailed findings can be found in my final paper for Notre Dame and Its Artifacts, titled "Fr. Sorin's Liturgical Crown Jewel: The Basilica of the Sacred Heart High Altar."

Without the resources of the Hesburgh Library, primarily those in the Notre Dame Archives but also additional print resources, the discoveries of my final paper simply would not

have been possible. Simply finding the name of the altar's designer was a struggle prior to my work in the Archives! Thus, I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked in the Archives and with library resources overall, and am exceptionally pleased with the discoveries I have made.