



# CHURCH OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER

San Francisco, California

25th Anniversary of the Restoration

1998 - 2023



# 25th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer

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By Robert Vergara

*The beautiful church that you see today at San Francisco's Most Holy Redeemer Parish is the result of 122 years of loving care. In particular, a committed group of visionaries carried out a restoration of the church 25 years ago. This is a brief history of that restoration. Great gratitude is extended to Marc Colelli, co-chair of the Restoration Committee, who today remains an active and well-loved parishioner at Most Holy Redeemer. His vivid and extensive recollections made this essay possible.*

The Church of the Most Holy Redeemer rode out the Loma Prieta Earthquake quite well. In the choir loft, there was damage to the ceiling and wall, but in general, not bad for a building in its 88th year. Most Holy Redeemer, designed by Charles A. I. Devlin, was dedicated on Christmas Day 1901, and the first Mass was held three weeks later on January 12, 1902, Archbishop Patrick W. Riordan presiding (1). Since then, the church had seen the 1906 earthquake and fire, two world wars, a depression, and what President Kennedy called the "long, twilight struggle" of the Cold War (2). By the late 1960s, however, MHR was facing challenges. Attendance at Mass was in decline, as many of the old families who had lived in the Eureka Valley and been parishioners at Most Holy Redeemer for decades moved to the suburbs. The grammar school, which had served generations since 1925, closed in 1979 due to declining enrollment (3). Taking the place of the Eureka Valley's old-time San Franciscans was a new generation of San Franciscans: young people, many of them gay, and Eureka Valley became The Castro.

Openly gay people were a demographic not usually associated with the Catholic Church, and when some of those men began attending Mass at MHR, long-time parishioners at first didn't know what to make of them. And yet, after an initial period of unease, the parish saw the birth of a remarkable alliance of older parishioners and these young gay men — "the gays and the grays" — an alliance that breathed new life into the parish. That term was a favorite of Most Holy Redeemer's dynamic pastor, Father Tony McGuire. He arrived in 1982 and quickly set up listening sessions for parishioners to discuss ways to revitalize the parish. One of the points on which the participants agreed was that MHR should establish a Parish Advisory Board, later renamed the Parish Council. The council, in turn, concluded that MHR should reach out to the gay people of the neighborhood. The older parishioners, many of them women whose husbands had passed away and whose children had moved away, responded by, in a manner of speaking, "adopting" the young gay men of the parish, and together they restored the vitality that the parish had lost in prior years. When the AIDS crisis hit, Most Holy Redeemer, unique in the Catholic Church, was at the forefront of the response. The AIDS Support Group began in 1985. The building that had served as the school convent was transformed into a hospice for people dying of AIDS (4).

Father McGuire was assigned to new duties in 1990 and was replaced as pastor by Father Zachary Shore. It was under his leadership that the decision was made not only to restore the church





Most Holy Redeemer Church prior to the restoration.  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



Altar and tabernacle prior to the restoration. Note  
 how the baldacchino partially obscures the stained  
 glass window of the Most Holy Redeemer.  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*





The north wall prior to the restoration. The doors lead to the St. Theresa Room. Now this is the main entrance from the narthex. The Sacred Heart statue is now on the south wall.  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



The south wall prior to the restoration. The doors lead to an exit. Now this is the space holding the holy oils. The statue of Mary is now in the Diamond Street/Ellard Hall vestibule.  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*





Main aisle and choir loft prior to the restoration. Note the netting on the ceiling, protecting those below from falling plaster as a result of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. During the restoration, the solid banister in front of the choir loft was replaced by a more open railing. The massive frame and doors at the top of the steep entrance stairs are now the entrance to the library. *Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



Choir loft prior to the restoration. Note the earthquake damage. *Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



building but also to reconfigure the worship space to respond to the times. The summary of a Restoration Committee meeting of February 13, 1993, reports on their decision to restore the church in time for the parish centennial in 2001 (5). Father McGuire had appointed Larry Bongort, an architect, to head the Restoration Committee. Larry moved to San Francisco in 1981 and, after friends suggested he check out Most Holy Redeemer, he became a parishioner. The committee began by adopting recommendations made by Van Brunt Associates, a company which evaluates building infrastructure, and which concluded a property condition report in June 1989. The report called for updates to the church and rectory to address considerations such as fire code issues, asbestos removal, lighting and electrical upgrades, and handicapped access. To those basics the committee added a major decision: to reconfigure the worship space from its traditional basilica style to one responding to the call of the Second Vatican Council to encourage greater participation by the congregation in the Liturgy (6). This decision was in place by 1994. A report of the Restoration Committee dated September 13, 1994, writes that "Reconfiguration would better communicate a sense of oneness and a sense of being a community gathered together for worship." (5)

Larry Bongort moved to Hawaii while plans were still being finalized, and he was replaced in the spring of 1995 by co-chairs Marc Colelli and Matt Soares. Marc was a newcomer to the parish, and had recently supervised a building project at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland. Matt, an interior designer painter, brought his creative skills to the project. Parish bulletins from 1995 on explained to parishioners the progress of planning, construction, and fundraising (5).

On Sunday, November 9, 1997, the final Mass was held at the church in its old configuration (7). Demolition and construction began. Masses were moved to the Parish Hall downstairs, and the seating arrangement for those Masses, set in a semicircle around the altar, helped prepare the worshipers for the changes that were taking place upstairs. Working with restoration project director David Simmons, project architect John Goldman, and liturgical consultant Brother William Woeger, FSC, the vision of the Restoration Committee took shape. The altar was moved from within the sanctuary to the center of the worship space. Beneath the new altar was installed a block of stone cut from the previous altar. The tabernacle was placed on a block of stone from the altar on which it stood before the restoration. The baldacchino and wood paneling on the back wall of the sanctuary, installed in the 1950s, were removed, and — surprise! — the workers discovered forgotten stained glass windows depicting the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. For reasons unknown, the images are on the wrong sides — Mary on the right and Joseph on the left. The windows were refurbished and left in that configuration. The demolition of that wood paneling uncovered the crumbling west wall of the church building, the unanticipated repair of which added even more to the growing cost of the project (8).

The old pews, which had faced the sanctuary and placed the congregation in the position of spectators to what the priest and altar servers were doing, were carted away and replaced by new seating which surrounded the altar and invited the congregation to closer participation in the Liturgy. The St. Theresa room on the north side of the church, which had been used by Eucharistic Ministers to pray and prepare for Mass, and which was accessed from the street by stairs that were not used, was replaced by the narthex, the new main entrance to the church. Its stairs, spaced at a more shallow angle, and the addition of an elevator were a vast improvement over the impossibly steep and narrow staircase of the previous entrance. On the south wall, an exit was transformed into the space for the holy oils. On both walls, the original door frames remain.



Demolition underway.  
*Archives of the Church of  
the Most Holy Redeemer.*



Old pews being removed.  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



Window on the north wall. Note the liberal use of red in the old color scheme. *Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



The garden during the restoration. *Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



The wooden doors that served as the main entrance to the church from the top of the front stairs were repurposed as the entrance to the library below the narthex. Few libraries have such an impressive entrance. The banister in front of the choir loft, which originally was solid, was replaced by a more open railing, bringing the choir closer to the congregation. In addition to new lighting, a skylight was installed, brightening the church's interior even further (8).

The stained glass windows were restored and updated. The glass above and below the main images was orange with a coat of red paint which, by the 1990s, was peeling (8). They were replaced by glass, designed by Roger Hogan Stained Glass Studios, which carried on the motifs in the backgrounds of the main stained glass images that were designed by the Franz Mayer firm in Germany and installed in the church around the late 1920s (9). Larry Bongort remembers that, in the window depicting Jesus giving the keys to Peter, a panel had been installed incorrectly, so that for who knows how many years, a sheep's legs were upside-down. This was corrected as well (6). The medallions which had been at the top of the stained glass windows were repurposed and can now be found in the narthex, Ellard Hall, the library, and the vestibule inside the old main entrance. Red paint, symbolizing the Blood of Christ, was everywhere in the old worship space — on the windows, the columns, the ceiling, the wall of the sanctuary. Along with insufficient lighting, it made for a rather dark church. A new, brighter color scheme was created by Matt Soares. When there was some repainting of the church interior recently, Matt's color scheme was retained in his memory. Also in his memory is the space for the holy oils, named in remembrance of a man who contributed much to the restoration but died after a long battle with cancer on September 28, 1996, before he could see the results of his labors (8).

The work on the church building took a year. On Sunday, November 8, 1998, at 10 am Mass, Archbishop William J. Levada presided over the rededication of Most Holy Redeemer Church (10). The renovation of the Parish Hall and the construction of the new garden were completed early the next year. May 22 and 23, 1999, was celebrated as "Wrap-Up Weekend" with the blessing of the Parish Hall and the opening of the new garden (11).

For the next decade, fundraising continued to pay off the debt. One of Marc Colelli's strongest memories about the project is what he calls "the incredible generosity of the parishioners." He remembers that the project, originally expected to cost 1.5 million dollars, ended up coming in at closer to 2.5 million. Parishioners contributed about \$10,000 every "Mortgage Sunday," the first Sunday of each month. One former parishioner stood out. Rose Ellard had not attended Most Holy Redeemer in recent years, but the parish bookkeeper, Mary Geracimos, continued to mail the parish bulletin to Rose, whose husband had passed away and who had no children. When Rose read about the fundraising drive for the restoration, she decided to leave Most Holy Redeemer a gift of one million dollars. Her bequest insured that the project would be financially secure and, after the restoration was complete, the Parish Hall was named in Rose's honor. The parish was close to paying off the loan it had received from the San Francisco Archdiocese, thanks, in part, to the lower interest rate that Nick Andrade of the Finance Council had negotiated (8).

Finally, a little over 11 years after the completion of the project, the big day came. Marc, Nick, and Father Steve Meriwether, the pastor, met with archbishop George Niederauer. The Archbishop came to the meeting with some trepidation, anticipating that the parishioners were there to beg forgiveness of the balance of the loan. He was pleasantly surprised when the delegation in-





Father Steve Meriwether (later to be named Pastor), Bishop Patrick J. McGrath, David Simmons (parishioner and Restoration Project Manager), Marc Colelli (parishioner and Restoration Committee Co-Chair), Father Zachary Shore (Pastor).  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



Old main entrance during the restoration.  
The signs read "Caution: Wear Your Hard Hat."  
*Archives of the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer.*



stead presented him with a check to pay off the loan. Mary Quinlin, a member of the Restoration Committee, had passed away in 2007 and left \$300,000 to the project, and Chuck McLaughlin, a World War II veteran and longtime MHR parishioner, who had passed in 2003, left the parish \$100,000 that was restricted to be the final payment on the mortgage. These gifts put Most Holy Redeemer over the top. Soon after, the parishioners celebrated with a mortgage-burning ceremony (8).

Twenty-five years on, we look back with gratitude to a group of talented, committed individuals, some of whom are still with us, some of whom have gone to their reward. The work they did together contributed to making Most Holy Redeemer a place where, physically as well as spiritually, God's inclusive love is proclaimed.

## Sources

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- 10 Most Holy Redeemer Parish Bulletin, Nov. 8, 1998.
- 11 Most Holy Redeemer Parish Bulletin, May 23, 1999.





### **Restoration Committee**

Larry Bongort, Chair (*To 1995*)

Marc Colelli, Co-Chair

Matt Soares, Co-Chair

Cathy Cunningham, Secretary

Grace Kennealy (*To 1994*)

Mary Quinlin

John Squeri

Michael Vargas

### **Ex Officio Members**

Father Zachary Shore, *Pastor*

Sister Theresa Caluori, BVM, *Pastoral Associate*

Father Thomas Hayes, OMI, *Priest in Residence*

John Oddo, *Director of Music*

### **Project Staff**

David Simmons, *Project Manager*

John Goldman, *Architect*

Brother William Woeger, FSC, *Liturgical Consultant*