

Papal prayer space: Restored Pauline Chapel ready for inauguration

VATICAN CITY - After more than four years in office, Pope Benedict XVI finally will be able to preside over his first event in the Pauline Chapel of the Apostolic Palace.

The chapel, named after the 16th-century Pope Paul III, features the last two frescoes painted by Michelangelo: One depicts the conversion of St. Paul and the other shows the crucifixion of St. Peter.

In a March 15 article for *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, the director of the Vatican Museums said Pope Benedict would inaugurate the restored chapel June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul and the end of the yearlong celebration of the 2,000th anniversary of St. Paul's birth.

Adding another Paul into the mix, the Vatican has announced that the rearrangement of the liturgical space carried out under Pope Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council will be almost completely reversed, restoring most of the furnishings to their original place.

However, Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, said that while the chapel's original marble altar will be returned it will not be put flush against the wall, so that Mass can still be celebrated "both 'versus populum' (toward the people) as well as 'versus crucem' (toward the cross)."

Pope John Paul II had already undone one of changes made immediately after the Second Vatican Council; he had workers take up the carpeting that had been laid in part because Pope Paul's arthritic walk made him prone to slipping on marble, said an official who worked with Pope Paul.

While the Pauline Chapel commonly is described as the most private of the chapels in the Vatican, Pope John Paul regularly invited groups to join him there for an early morning Mass. It holds about 100 worshippers, roughly four times as many people

as can fit in the private chapel of the papal apartment.

From 1979 to 1982, when Pope John Paul baptized babies, the Pauline Chapel was the location he chose. The annual ceremony was moved to the Sistine Chapel in 1983 when he baptized 20 infants, instead of the usual dozen, and the Pauline Chapel could not hold all the parents, godparents, siblings and guests.

Modern rules for a conclave to elect a pope specify that the world's cardinals are to gather in the Pauline Chapel to take their vow of secrecy before processing into the Sistine Chapel for the election. But the Pauline Chapel was filled with scaffolding in 2005 during the conclave that elected Pope Benedict, so the cardinals had to gather in the nearby Hall of the Blessings.

Pope Benedict has visited the chapel since his election, but only to inspect the work in progress. His latest visit was Feb. 25, Paolucci said.

The work began in 2003 and has been carried out with funding from the England, Ireland, Florida, Texas, Arizona and Connecticut chapters of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums.

Hosting a review of the work last September, Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, president of the commission governing Vatican City, said, "I would be even happier if this meeting could have taken place long before today because the time needed to restore the Pauline Chapel has gone beyond what was predicted."

He said the delay was due partially to "the architectural characteristics" of the chapel, but also for "other reasons of various kinds" that he did not specify.

In his Vatican newspaper article, Mr. Paolucci said the restoration work on the Michelangelo frescoes has revealed a color scheme similar to that of the massive "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel, a work completed the year before he began work on the frescoes in the Pauline Chapel.

The colors will be brighter than they were before the cleaning began, but they are not the vivid colors characteristic of Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, Mr. Paolucci wrote.

“Liberated from the dark, oily covering that oppressed and obscured them, the Michelangelo frescoes have re-emerged with their figurative coherence and chromatic truth,” he wrote.

Mr. Paolucci said the cleaning of the frescoes was not meant “to restore them to their original splendor” – an attempt that would be impossible as well as dishonest since it would mean ignoring the passage of time – but to promote their preservation and make them easier to see and, therefore, to enjoy.

Obviously, however, the work cannot be declared complete until the pope celebrates a liturgy there, restoring the Pauline Chapel to its original purpose.