

# Rebuilt 2.0: Nativity parish dedicates new church

TIMONIUM - A Catholic parish at the forefront of the New Evangelization celebrated the opening of its new worship space Sept. 8.

Archbishop William E. Lori led the Church of the Nativity and its pastor, Father Michael White, in the solemn dedication of its church and altar. They are the centerpieces of a \$15 million project at a parish where weekend Masses draw 4,000 and it had run out of space to fulfill its burgeoning mission.

"This structure is meant to express not only the size of your parish," Archbishop Lori said in his homily, "but also its vitality, coupled with hope and vision for the future."

On the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the first half of a 1-hour, 31-minute liturgy evoked the Easter Vigil.

The only illumination during the first 49 minutes came from morning light - dimmed by screens - coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows behind the altar; exit signs; and spotlights that at turns focused attention on the choir, the ambo and the rites being performed by Archbishop Lori.

Only after he had blessed the church; placed relics of St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Katherine Drexel and St. John Paul II in the mensa of the altar; anointed it and observed acolytes incensing the altar; did the house lights come on and the screens behind the altar lift to let in sunlight filtered through substantial shade trees.

"We wanted a brighter space," Tom Corcoran, pastoral associate, said before the liturgy. "We've invested a lot in the lighting. Father White likes to say, 'lighting is architecture.' It allows us to highlight the beauty, solemnity and mystery of the consecration and the eucharistic prayer."

Father White's background includes serving as priest secretary to Cardinal William H. Keeler in 1995, when the aforementioned St. John Paul II visited Baltimore. He became pastor of Nativity a year later.

He and Corcoran have gained national acclaim for their 2012 book, "Rebuilt," which drew inspiration from Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California and other evangelical churches in outlining how Nativity brought back those who had stopped practicing the faith.

Program acknowledgements listed dozens of staff, such as Kristin DeVan, a creative associate who served as lector, and volunteers, such as Mary Claire Goff, a parish council member.

A co-leader of the 175 who volunteer on the café staff, Goff is among those who credit Father White with strengthening their faith.

"I knew something was missing in my life when I came to Nativity," said Goff, who did so at the invitation of a neighbor, Debbie Yokum. "I found peace here. I wasn't being judged, I was welcomed, and I love Father White. The way he draws you in with his message (homily), it helps your faith, puts it in terms of your life, and how it can help you."

That message was previously delivered in a less inviting space.

Founded in 1968 out of the southern portion of St. Joseph in Cockeysville, under the leadership of Monsignor Charles F. Meisel, the only other pastor Nativity has had, the parish originally worshipped in Ridgeley Middle School until June 1971, when its church was dedicated by Cardinal Lawrence Shehan.

Inspired by the reforms of Vatican II, brown dominated the old church, which sat 550 and did not have kneelers.

The new one does, along with Stations of the Cross lining the interior back wall and a pair of 16-foot-by-9-foot video screens on walls that flank the altar. The floor seats 1,000 in a gently sloping semicircle, with plans to add another 500 seats in the balcony.

"When I first walked in," said JoAnne Cianfichi, who is involved in the parish's Missions Ministry, "I said to myself, 'Yes, you know God is here.'"

In addition to state of the art lighting, audio is piped in not just to the lengthy

Narthex, which leads to the Vision Café and the Crying Loft, but the restrooms.

A hallway connects the gathering space to the old church. Besides expanding the parking lot from 275 to 375 spaces and making obsolete standing-room-only Masses, the project frees the old church to better serve a burgeoning youth program.

Nativity provides formation for 450 children in grade 5s and younger, and another 350 in middle and high school. While it's not adding any new programs, it now can better accommodate growing families.

"You want to give every child a firm foundation in the faith," said Corcoran, himself the father of seven. "It was frustrating when we didn't have space, even for younger children. Parents say, 'when do something for my kid, you're doing something for me.'"

In addition to the café, "Vision" is the name of the parish fundraising campaign that received donations from approximately 1,300 families, individuals and other entities. Its honorary chairmen were Frank Kelly and Jim Smith, a former State Senator and Baltimore County Executive, respectively.

Before the final blessing, Stephanie Clancy, chairwoman of the parish financial council, informed Archbishop Lori that the project came in "ahead of schedule, within budget and with no long-term debt."

Corcoran said the financing did involve a "bridge loan."

The project was overseen by Lewis Contractors, of Owings Mills, and involved 30 other firms, including an altar from Albl Oberammergau Liturgical Art, based in the German town famous for its elaborate staging of the Passion Play every 10 years.

"This was a nice team effort," said Bryan Rowe, project manager. "There are plenty of construction projects that don't go like this."

The morning began outside the entrance to the church, with the presentation of the blueprints and a ceremonial key to Archbishop Lori, who quipped, "I will try it all around the property."

In addition to Father White, concelebrants included Bishop Denis J. Madden and Father Lawrence Kumanda Sakala, a visiting priest.

Nativity will hold open its doors to all Sept. 10, with its regular Sunday Masses at 9 a.m., 10:30 a.m., noon and 5:30 p.m., with a parish festival featuring food trucks and big screens showing the Ravens' season opener.

The parish's conferences on evangelization have been rebranded Rebuilt, with the next scheduled for April 2018.

"We're not growing because of any new (housing) developments," Corcoran said of the parish. "We're intentionally growing, by reaching out to the un-churched and the de-churched. We want to share with others, this is what's possible, God is still moving people. We hope it's an encouragement to other parishes.

"You hear people say, 'Nobody cares about God anymore.' We know that's not true."

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