

Voyageur Media Group, Inc.  
[www.voyageurmedia.org](http://www.voyageurmedia.org)

## **Interview Transcript**

*Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati*

for personal, educational or academic use with citation

© 2008, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.

The Reverend Christopher R. Armstrong  
Former Chancellor, Archdiocese of Cincinnati; Pastor, St. Antoninus  
Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc., 2008

### **St. Peter in Chains Cathedral**

Saint Peter in Chains is actually the third cathedral for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The original place of worship was on Liberty Street where Saint Francis Seraph is now located. It was chosen because it was outside the town limits and the congregation wanted to have a cemetery there, which they couldn't have inside the city limits. The Catholic population centered itself in the south and east parts of the city. The chronology of naming the cathedral seems to be unclear. The first site of worship was known as St. Patrick's but it's listed in the City Register as Christ Church. Bishop Fenwick wanted to move the church closer to where people lived because almost everyone had to walk at that time, so he moved the location of the cathedral to 6th and Sycamore Street where Saint Xavier Church is currently located and it was there that they built the present structure. When it moved to Sixth and Sycamore, it was named by Bishop Fenwick as St. Peter's.

St. Xavier Church was the center for archdiocese in life. Well, I should say the Diocese of Cincinnati. The Diocese of Cincinnati included, at that time, the whole state of Ohio and parts of Indiana, and Michigan, and Illinois. And Bishop Fenwick would spend October through May here in Cincinnati, and he wanted to establish a cathedral and a seminary for the education of priests, because that usually is a bishop's main concern, having enough priests to serve the faithful. And Bishop Fenwick was a Dominican. The Dominicans are devoted to preaching and study, and he wanted to have a well-educated clergy. So, he began the Athenaeum of Ohio. Cincinnati was known as the Athens of the West. There was a great interest in Greek culture at that time, the 1820s and 1830s, and that's why it's called the Athenaeum of the West. When Bishop Fenwick decided that he would not be able to staff the seminary with a sufficient number of priests who were well-trained in the theological sciences, he asked the Jesuit fathers to come and staff the seminary and the cathedral which, after some negotiations, they eventually did. And so that church, St. Xavier, has been in the care of the Jesuit fathers since that time. It's also from which Xavier University was founded.

It seems that that in 1823, Bishop Fenwick was on a mission trip to Europe, where he met Cardinal Fesch, who was the uncle of Napoleon. Cardinal Fesch had amassed a huge collection of paintings as he went with his nephew Napoleon throughout Europe. In fact, it's estimated that he had a collection of over 50,000 paintings. He had abandoned his responsibilities as a bishop while he was campaigning with his nephew, Napoleon. When Napoleon was defeated, Cardinal Fesch repented; and as part of his penance, Pope Pius VII determined that he should give away some of his paintings, which he did to different mission churches in the United States, Baltimore and Cincinnati being the recipients of 12 paintings each. Among those paintings was one claimed to have been done by Mario and was considered a real treasure in the City of Cincinnati. Subsequently, it has been discovered that the painting is not by Mario but by another Spanish artist, Roelas. When the cathedral was built in 1840 to 1845, that painting was made the centerpiece of the cathedral. And somewhere between 1823 and 1845, the official name of the cathedral became St. Peter in Chains. I believe it was inspired by that painting, which had such a prominent place in the new cathedral.

Bishop Purcell chose this site at 8th and Plum for the same reason that Bishop Fenwick chose the site at 6th and Sycamore. He was following the population of the city as it was moving in a westerly direction. He bought this from Mr. Burnet, famous in Cincinnati for Burnet Woods, and had also engaged an architect who was Walter, I believe. Bishop Purcell had set up the parameters. He wanted a large church for the time, and he wanted it built in the neo-Grecian style.

Cincinnati began in 1789, and there was a large influx of Irish immigrants in the 1820s. It is said because Andrew Jackson was elected president, and it was the first time in over 300 years that an Irishman had political power. So, there was a large influx of Irish to Cincinnati. In the 1830s and 1840s, there was a large influx of German immigrants who were of every political and religious stripe. It was determined by Beecher, who was a Protestant minister in New England, that this influx of German immigrants into the center of the continental United States would result in a Catholic country. He was determined to stop that and emigrated from New England to Cincinnati specifically to preach a brand of Americanism and anti-Catholicism. When Bishop Purcell was named bishop here in 1830, he had determined that one of the things he wanted to do was to build a cathedral. He wanted to build the cathedral in the neo-Grecian style because that is the style that was used for government buildings in Washington, DC. And he wanted to prove to his fellow citizens that Catholics, no matter what their ethnic origin, were as loyal as citizens as anyone else in the United States. And he wanted to make an architectural statement; hence, the neo-Grecian style for St. Peter in Chains Cathedral.

At the time, it was one of the largest buildings in the City of Cincinnati. It was also known as the White Angel because of the white marble that was used in its construction. And as the river boats were coming up and down the river, it is said that they could see the spire of the cathedral from 10 miles off. And if you stood around the hills of Cincinnati, one of the spectacular landmarks was the Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains. And it was that way for at least 10 years or so from about 1845 to 1855.

The Cathedral was looked on as a very significant building. At the time, Bishop Purcell asked that each working Catholic contribute 12 1/2 cents a month to the construction of the Cathedral, which would be a considerable amount of money when you think of what laborers, and it would have been mostly laborers, were earning at the time. One of the major donors was Springer, who maintained a great interest in helping to build and to beautify the interior of the Cathedral.

People wanted to make a statement about who they are and their faith. We belong here. We have as much right to be here as anybody else. One of the things that they remarked upon, for example, in the building of the cathedral is that no hard liquor was ever consumed by the laborers as they built the cathedral. And that was very important because Catholics and the Irish in particular were seen as drunks. I mean, they were seen as undesirable persons because of alcoholism. And so, they remarked on the fact that the laborers probably took the pledge as the cathedral was being built. The other thing that people found remarkable is that the laborers were paid every Saturday, which is important because one of the sins that cries out into heaven is the laborer who is not paid for his just wage. So I think that in building the cathedral, they were also trying to put into practice gospel values. There are some Christians who do not see Catholics as Christians and so you would have that kind of rivalry. I think that ethnic and religious differences that were held in Europe came with the immigrants here to the United States and they continued. But there was also within the Catholic community, pretty much a rivalry between the Irish immigrants and the German immigrants who had two totally different experiences of church. The German immigrants were used to a greater lay participation. And they formed societies; they were responsible for the fabric of their churches; they were very good in supporting their clergy and benevolent societies, like taking care of orphans or cholera victims. The Irish, however, had been persecuted. They were not allowed to worship openly. The Irish tended not to be well organized. They tended not to support the church as well as the Germans did and it caused difficulties. There is a story of when this building was being dedicated: it was being dedicated when the Irish had their English mass and they had locked the doors, and when the Germans had come to participate in the dedication of the building, they were locked out. In response, they beat the doors down so that they could come in and be part of the consecration of the new cathedral.

In the city of Cincinnati, German was spoken as a first language up to the First World War, and taking care of these immense congregations as immigrants were flooding in, would require somebody who could speak their language. And so, they tended to separate themselves according to ethnic groups. In Cincinnati, that tended to be the Germans and the Irish but there was also a significant population of Italians, so there were some Italian churches here as well. There was a Dutch church and a Hungarian church, a Polish church; it was easier to take care of the spiritual needs of the people by having priest and people speak the same language. But also, they shared some religious and cultural customs that helped them navigate in this new world in which they found themselves. And the same is happening today. Currently we have Hispanic, Korean, and Vietnamese communities that have organized

themselves for the same purpose so that their spiritual needs are met, but also so that they can navigate their lives in this new world, in this new condition in which they find themselves.

Just look at the geography of the City of Cincinnati. The area in which the cathedral is located is called the basin, and then you have palisades or what we call the Seven Hills of Cincinnati. It was not particularly easy to get up those hills and in fact, you couldn't get up them until the inclines were built. It was during that time, as the population of the City of Cincinnati grew, there were about 300,000 to 400,000 people living in the basin of the city. And within the basin, there were 17 Catholic churches.

I think that they were equally distributed between German speaking parishes and English speaking parishes. It is said that the way you could tell a parish was English speaking if it was named after one of the mysteries of our Lord's life like Blessed Sacrament. Or, if it was German speaking, it was named after one of the Saints like Saint Henry or Saint William.

The Cathedral was looked on as a very significant building. At the time, Bishop Purcell asked that each working catholic contribute 12 1/2 cents a month to the construction of the Cathedral, which would be a considerable amount of money when you think of what laborers, and it would have been mostly laborers, were earning at the time. One of the major donors was Springer, who maintained a great interest in helping to build and to beautify the interior of the Cathedral.

The Cathedral is surrounded by Corinthian columns that are modeled after the Tower of the Winds in Greece. Those were considered some of the most beautiful pillars in the whole world. Bishop Purcell wanted to be sure that the steeple of the cathedral would rise from its foundations and so the architect then employed more columns around the steeple of the cathedral. An interesting fact of that steeple is that it had to be repaired and the marble for the very pinnacle of the steeple is different from the marble that's used in the rest of the buildings. So when it rains, that marble absorbs more water and turns a darker gray than the rest of the building.

The reason that a cathedral is called a cathedral is that it contains the Bishop's seat or cathedra. And so the building is named after that architectural feature and the cathedra, or the Bishop's seat, is the symbol of his teaching power. And in ancient times, a teacher sat to express his authority over the subject matter. The Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains in comparison to other cathedrals throughout the United States is architecturally significant, because in the 19th Century, the prevailing architecture was Neo-Gothic. When many dioceses were erected, a parish church was usually settled on or designated as the cathedral. What makes St. Peter in Chains Cathedral unusual is that it was built as a cathedral. It was also compared to the Basilica in Baltimore, which was designed by Latrobe, if I'm not mistaken, along Neo-Classical lines. The cathedral of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati is still considered a unique structure and I believe one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the United States.

Bishop Purcell had founded the Cathedral because of population shifts in the city. The population of Cincinnati began to shift as the suburbs began to open up and the population of the basin began to decline. And as the population base began to decline, so did the fabric of the Cathedral. It fell in to disrepair. It was in such a bad state of disrepair that it was actually condemned by the City of Cincinnati because the floor boards had rotted out and so St. Peter in Chains was maintained as a parish to serve the population that was in this area, but in 1938 Archbishop McNicholas determined that the cathedral would need to move from 8th and Plum to Saint Monica's in Clifton.

Saint Monica's was a church that had been built by Schulte, who eventually would become the architect who would oversee the renovation of the new cathedral.

An apocryphal story is this: Father Dan Tenover, who was the priest in charge of overseeing the renovation of the present Cathedral, was the secretary to Archbishop Alter. Before Archbishop Alter became the Archbishop of Cincinnati, he was the Bishop of Toledo and he would have to come from Toledo to Cincinnati every year for the provincial meeting. And he determined that should he ever become the Archbishop of Cincinnati, he would see to it that the Cathedral, which had fallen into a state of decline and disrepair, would be resurrected. Well it so happened that in 1950, he in fact became the Archbishop of Cincinnati. At the time he was 65 years old. Archbishop Alter was something of a financial genius and he was able to raise sufficient funds to repair the cathedral and to finish the seminary on Beechmont Avenue, currently Mount St. Mary's Seminary. In the process of doing that, he also discovered in 1948, that the City of Cincinnati had an urban renewal plan. In 1950 when he became the

Archbishop, he went to the City Fathers and asked them how serious they were about this urban renewal plan. They said they were very serious and so he determined that he would renovate the cathedral and began the project in 1953.

The cathedral was re-opened in 1957. It was a week long celebration, which began on November the 3rd and continued through November the 10th. And the story that I've heard from many who attended was, as Archbishop Alter was leaving the cathedral, they thought that he would just continue walking up the staircase to Heaven. They said it was the most amazing kind of celebration and it was truly grand.

The mosaic behind me is a mosaic in the Byzantine style, so it's not exactly representational art, but rather it is to communicate a truth. What you see is Christ in Glory and you see him as a young man to suggest eternity. He's also dressed in a red robe, to signify love, which is spangled with stars. His white robe is that of a priest. And so together they represent His sacrificial love for humanity. He is extending the keys of the Kingdom to a kneeling St. Peter; Peter is made head of the church because of his confession, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." In the lower corner, below that scene in Latin is a phrase from Acts chapter 12. It's a combination of two verses, so it's says, "Peter indeed was kept in prison, bound in chains." And to one side we see St. Peter in Jerusalem.

The scene in the lower left-hand corner is the scene from Acts 12 where the angel comes and liberates Peter from prison. And that is where "in chains" comes from. In the lower right-hand corner is St. Paul visiting St. Peter in the Mamertine prison in Rome, where both of them would meet their martyrdom.

The mosaic was designed by Anton Wendling of Aachen, Germany and was executed with the help of the studios of T.C. Escher, also in Aachen. The material that is used is Venetian glass. So those are different small squares of glass. The gold is made this way. It's a layer of red glass topped with a layer of gold leaf and fused with clear glass which gives it its brilliance when you look at it. It was laid out in Germany and transported to the United States. They had to get special permits for the workers from Germany to come with it. It was attached to a linen sheet, brought to the United States, and then assembled as we see it today.

The muralist here in the cathedral is Carl Zimmerman, and Carl Zimmerman actually represents a long line of German muralists and other German craftsmen who exercised their arts here in the Cincinnati region between 1820 and 1960. And with this influx of German artisans, not only do we have a wonderful collection of murals, but also, woodworking, metal sculpture and stained glass windows. This whole collection of German-American art rivals, I believe, the Hispano-American art from the Californian Missions, as well as the Turquoise Trail between Santa Fe and Taos.

The murals in the Stations of the Cross resulted from a conversation that took place between Father Dan Tenover, who was responsible for overseeing the renovation of the cathedral, and the artist Carl Zimmerman. Carl Zimmerman is a local Cincinnati artist originally born in Indianapolis, who taught at the Cincinnati Art Academy. And it was, I believe, a divine inspiration. The inspiration for the Stations of the Cross is the architecture of the cathedral, which is Neo-Grecian. So, they determined that they would use Greek pottery painting from the 6th through the 4th century B.C. as the style for the Stations of the Cross. The 1st station and the 12th station are individual panels. The other stations share one panel. What divides the panels is the Tree of Life. So, for example, in Stations 2 and 3, we have the Tree of Teaching, which shows the four evangelists; and in Stations 4 and 5, we have the Tree of Suffering, which includes designs or instruments of the Lord's passion.

Zimmerman is also responsible for the angel motif that surrounds the ceiling of the cathedral. They are taken from Greek perfume urns.

There are also metal works here in the cathedral. One of the artists was Haswell who was a student of Clement Barnhorn. And he executed the angels that cover the working screen and the fire [INAUDIBLE]. Another artist is Robert Koepnick who is a native of Dayton, and he executed the Risen Savior that stands atop the baptismal font.

I think that it's not appreciated in the way that it should be. Unfortunately, during the renovations of many of our churches subsequent to the Second Vatican Council, some of this work was either removed or whitewashed. And I think the challenge that we face is linking all of these treasures together to see

them as a unit and not as isolated works of art, but they belong to this long line of German muralists that extend back to the High Middle Ages.

There was a student from the University of Cincinnati who was writing her Master's thesis on the Cardinal Fesch collection. Part of her thesis was that this collection of 12 paintings was their first view in public. She believes that this collection was the catalyst for other Cincinnatians to purchase Western European art. She also believes that it could have been the impetus for the establishment of the Cincinnati Art Museum.

I've tried to do some research into where these 12 paintings are. It seems that we can locate some of them, but not all of them because no one ever made an exact list of the paintings and what their subject matter was. Some of them hang here in the cathedral and others are at our seminary on Beechmont Avenue.

The major renovation that took place during the 1950s was the expansion of the cathedral. Where the old cathedral ended, the transept was added; beyond that is the current sanctuary. So the church was in a basilica form before the renovations; now, it's in a cruciform or it looks like a cross, a Latin cross. There are other distinguishing features; in the North transept, the baptismal font was added. This was to emphasize the importance of the sacrament of Baptism as the doorway to eternal life. It is surrounded by a circular staircase, which leads down to the undercroft. So, the approach from the street level on 8th Street into that door, you come up these grand staircases and see this magnificent baptismal font, which has the Risen Savior by Koepnick. Another distinguishing feature is that the stained glass windows were removed and a tighter stone and glass design was incorporated, the stone looking like the chains of St. Peter and the glass a much darker color with motifs of the martyrdom of St. Peter.

Opposite the baptismal font area on the south transept is the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. That was very unusual in its day because black could not be a color used in association with the Blessed Sacrament. So, special permission was needed in order to use the imperial black stone found near Knoxville, Tennessee. It's a very striking and dramatic space because the interior is black except where the Blessed Sacrament is and you see this Greek design of gold and white, which offsets the tabernacle.

The other architectural feature that was made during the renovation is the freestanding altar. And in this regard, Archbishop Alter anticipated the renewal of the Second Vatican Council because before the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, he would have celebrated mass with his back to the people. After the reforms of the council where the priest was to face the people, the cathedral required no further renovations because it was already a freestanding altar. Certainly, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council had been talked about a great deal, especially subsequent to World War II. So he would have been aware of those conversations.

The museum was organized, I believe, under Father Tom Nolker, one of the rectors here at the cathedral to enable the public to see some of the treasures, which the cathedral has. Perhaps the cathedral's most famous work of art is the corpus that was executed by Benvenuto Cellini, which is used on the processional cross and is surrounded by garnets. Another processional cross was also executed by Clement Barnhorn and is also used during liturgical celebrations here in the cathedral. The other objects in the museum would be chalices and ciboria, which had been given to the cathedral over the years by various donors. They are usually works of great artistic and historical value.

The architect who was in charge of the renovation was Edward Schulte. Edward Schulte also designed other churches in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. For example, Saint Monica's in Clifton as well as the Maronite Church of Saint Anthony of Padua on Victory Parkway. Schulte was very concerned about enabling the church to express its spiritual values through architecture. He would go to Europe every summer to look at the latest in ecclesiastical architecture and bring those ideas back here to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and his other clients. And you can see a distinct evolution of his work from one of his first churches, Saint Monica in Clifton to Saint Anthony of Padua, the Maronite Church on Victory Parkway. The cathedral is one of the jewels in the crown of the Queen City. It is one of the outstanding examples of Neo-Grecian architecture in the United States, and it is a proud symbol of a great faith: when you walk into the cathedral, you have a sense of the art, history, and culture of Cincinnati. You see what people working together can produce a work of great beauty and sublime majesty.

- end -