

In the Beginning ...

Geraldine M. Rohling, Ph.D., M.A.Ed
Archivist-Curator

In November of 1888, Bishop John Joseph Keane, the first rector (1888-1896) of The Catholic University of America (CUA), sailed for Rome to obtain papal approval for the opening of the university and to recruit distinguished European professors. He was accompanied by Reverend Thomas J. Shahan, the former chancellor of the Diocese of Hartford and secretary of Bishop Lawrence McMahon, whom he had selected to head the School of Canon Law. Shahan was to spend the year in Rome in preparation for his new position and to augment his academic credentials with a licentiate in both Canon and Civil Law. Towards the end of the academic year, Bishop Keane wrote to Shahan, lamenting that he had yet to find “a first rate man for Church History.” The Bishop suggested that Shahan follow his “natural bent, and make History, pure and simple, your specialty.” The proposed change was well received by Shahan, whose first love was, in fact, Church History. Shahan engaged in another study regimen, this time with the finest Church historians of Europe. After a year of medieval studies and German language at the University of Berlin, Bishop Keane recommended that Shahan, who was also fluent in French, augment his studies further at the Sorbonne in Paris with Abbé Louis Marie Duchesne (1843-1922), one of the most influential French Catholic historians and a disciple of Giovanni Battista De Rossi (1822-1894), the father of Christian Archaeology. Shahan had also fallen under the spell of De Rossi during his seminary years at the North American College (1878-1882). Although Shahan admired the genius of Duchesne, he found his brilliance too harsh and critical, in contrast to De Rossi, whose erudition and gentility Shahan greatly admired and thought worthy of emulation. In the end, it was the extracurricular study with De Rossi that was formative to the academic and ecclesiastical life of Thomas J. Shahan. It was not surprising then that his first lecture as a professor of Church History and Patrology at CUA was titled “The Blessed Virgin in the Catacombs” (1891), a lecture that was expanded into a book one year later.

The Blessed Virgin in the Catacombs was the progeny of personal Marian devotion coupled with studies of the Roman catacombs and inscriptions.

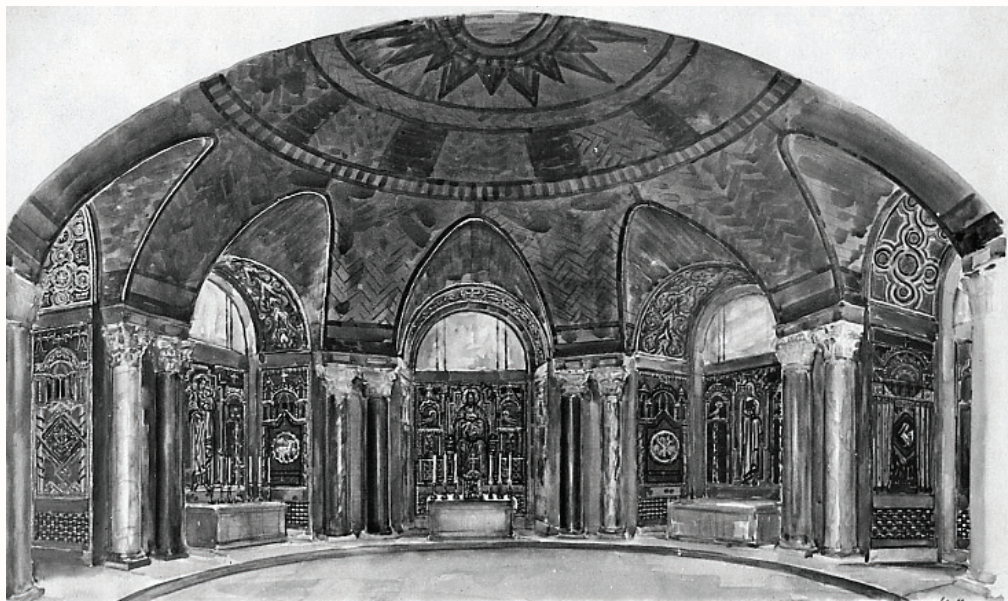
“The affectionate veneration of the Virgin Mother of Our Lord is a fact that meets us at the very threshold of Christian history. ... The splendid civilization of the fourth and fifth centuries is gone, and with it the numerous monuments ... [and] most of the domestic antiquities of the early Church. ... Fortunately for us, another class of monuments has been spared, in their original and substantially unimpaired form. These are the Roman Catacombs, and in them we will find those early origins of the *cultus* of the Blessed Virgin, which have been long since swept away from the upper earth” (*Catacombs*, pp. 9, 12-13).

The published lecture, which included illustrations of catacomb art, would become a source and resource for a dream yet to be named: the National Shrine.

Shahan was an antiquarian, a self-proclaimed “man of books,” and a medievalist whose interests and skills had been honed in Rome, Berlin, and Paris; a scholar and historian who felt that the contributions of the modern age could not compete with the basilicas of early Christianity and the cathedrals of the middle ages. These structures were not only great houses of worship but also sanctuaries of artistic truth and sincerity. Hence, in his teaching, professor Shahan sought to raise “intellectual cathedrals” that would lift the hearts and minds of the faithful to God. As rector and bishop, he would build a church like the basilicas and cathedrals of old, it would be “a great school of the Word of God”; a national shrine where “the wondrous mercies of God” could be experienced in a place where “Jesus begins his Eucharistic life among [the people of God]” (*The House of God*, 1905).

In December 1919, the story hit the wires of a National Shrine to be built in Washington, D.C. The church was described as a “noble Romanesque” structure with a crypt church finished in early Romanesque, “making it a unique ecclesiastical creation in our country, as this is the first edifice in which all the peculiarities of that style can be reproduced with success.” The interior design of the crypt church, which was dedicated to Our Lady of the Catacombs, came strictly under the influence and tutelage of now Bishop Shahan.

The crypt is ornamented with a very distinguished system of mosaic, based on the



Crypt Church, ca 1923

early Christian examples of Rome. In the triple apse are fifteen altar panels designed by John Louis Bancel La Farge (1865-1938), one of the outstanding muralists and Byzantine mosaicist of his time. Bancel was chosen for the job as his style was considered “more sympathetic with the spirit of the Shrine” (Maginnis to Shahan, 21 Mar 1924). Moreover, given “the remarkable place” which the elderly La Farge held in religious art, one could “perceive the measure of prestige which the association of the name [La Farge] would represent in the Shrine” (Maginnis to Shahan, 2 Jan 1925).

The La Farge family was one of distinction, both in the arts and in American history. Bancel was the son of John Frederick La Farge (1835-1910), an American artist, writer, and the dean of American mural painting. The third child of nine, his mother, Margaret Mason Perry, was a granddaughter of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, the hero of the battle of



John La Farge, SJ

Lake Erie during the War of 1812, and a direct descendant of Benjamin Franklin. Bancel was the father of Louis Bancel La Farge (1900-1989), a New York architect, who served on the staff of General Eisenhower as chief of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archive unit (MFAA) or the “Monuments Men” during World War II. John La Farge III (1880-1963), the younger brother of Bancel and the last of the nine children, was a Jesuit priest-journalist, Catholic activist, and a participant in the March on Washington in 1963. John is depicted in stained glass in the sacristy of the Great Upper Church among the windows honoring American priests and prelates.

Bancel was active in every form of art but his greatest inspiration and delight were Byzantine mosaics. His commission with the National Shrine began with the five mosaics in the north apse. The original contract was to supply the cartoons, mosaic, and to do the actual installation. Bancel created his mosaics in the

same manner as those of the early Christian era, a method and technique as exemplified in the mosaics of Palermo, the Baptistry of San Marco in Venice, and the famous apse of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Not surprisingly then, he also used Italian made *tesserae* (literally, “four” referring to the square nature of the pieces or tiles). Unable to get the necessary supplies, La Farge contacted Ravenna Mosaic Inc., an American subsidiary of one of the most progressive stained glass and mosaic workshops in Germany, and asked them to take over the production of the fifteen altar panels.

The German Glass Society of Puhl & Wagner, Berlin founded in 1889, the same year as the beginning of classes at CUA, employed medieval technique and style in their manufacturing of mosaics. In 1904, Puhl & Wagner, with the assistance of Emperor Wilhelm II, became the first company to build its own glass workshop and produce its own tesserae. The following year, they patented a new process which allowed them to create a larger palette of *smalti* (Italian, pl. “enamels”). The technique consisted of the amalgamation of gold or silver leaf with glass. This was achieved by pouring molten glass onto gold or silver leaf, causing the thin hot sheet of glass—barely visible to the human eye—to adhere to the metal. This not only protects the metal leaf from any effects or influences of water and temperature, but it also controls the color of the gold or silver. A layer of glass with a greenish tint cools the color; a reddish tint warms the color, allowing it to glow.

Smalti were developed for Byzantine mosaics. They are coveted for their color and unique properties and for their “imperfections,” which is to say their uneven surfaces and bubbles, which tell the viewer it is mosaic. The excellence of a mosaic shop is determined by the quality of its smalti and the range of its color palette. It is also one of the shaping factors regarding the visual appeal of a mosaic. This patented technique of Puhl & Wagner was critical to the success of the company, as it defined their smalti and colors. Puhl & Wagner stocked between six and seven thousand different shades of smalti.

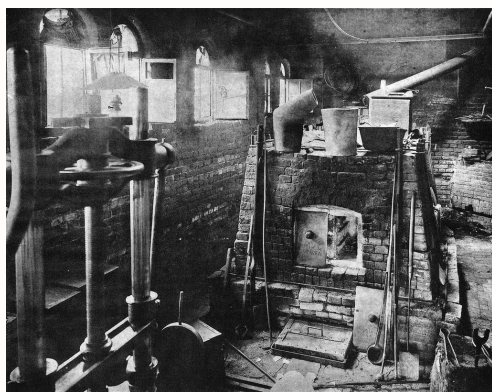
From 1923 to 1937 Ravenna Mosaic operated a studio in St. Louis and had offices in New York City. Much of the labor of fabricating the mosaics in the “reverse” or “mirror” method was done in Berlin at the studios of its parent company.

The translation of a cartoon or design into mosaic begins with the mosaicist—also an artist—chiseling the individual tesserae from the “plate” or “sheet” of enamel, according to the color requirements of the cartoon. The size of the tesserae varies but larger tiles produce a less sophisticated mosaic. The tesserae are then placed on a reverse sketch of the cartoon, as if creating a negative. The image in front of the mosaicist is actually the back or negative side of the mosaic.

When installing a mosaic the size of a dome at the National Shrine, the individual sections of the mosaic are all numbered and contiguous; they are assembled on the shop floor according



Puhl and Wagner Banner



Puhl-Wagner Glassworks



Puhl-Wagner 1926

to the section plan. The image is still reversed and is similar to a jigsaw puzzle.

La Farge was a bit ambivalent about turning over the production of the mosaics. He maintained the production of the Good Shepherd mosaic in his studio, while sending the cartoons for the other mosaics to Berlin, as he did not wish to suffer any further delays due to a lack of materials. “And in the panel to the Good Shepherd there is a long story which I will not go into here, only to say that we have been hung up in the work ... sent tardily to Italy for what was needed and after a very long delay they are only just getting it out of the Custom House. I have suffered much distress & anxiety over this situation knowing how anxious you have been but I have seen no way out of the impasse” (La Farge to Shahan, 6 May 1926).

The fifteen reredos mosaics in the crypt are “Venetian” or “enamel” mosaic. The individual tesserae are a composition of glass and enamel, the same type of material used in the mosaics of the Early Christian era from the fourth to the thirteenth centuries. The tesserae are solid in color; they are acid- and water-proof, assuring their survival for centuries. Only the gold and silver tesserae are not of solid composition. Each of the individual altar panels contains approximately sixty thousand pieces of tesserae, including the side panels. The fifteen niches together contain nearly 1.5 million tesserae.

Ravenna maintained its offices in New York and St. Louis under the direction of Gerdt Wagner, the son of August Wagner. In 1923, Paul Heuduck (1882-1972), a Berlin employee of Puhl & Wagner, emigrated with his family from Germany to St. Louis, as the following letter stipulates:

The bearer of this letter, the mosaic-artist Mr. Paul Heuduck of Berlin, sent to St. Louis Missouri by the authorization of our company ... through the agency of our representative, The Emil Frei Art Glass Company, St. Louis, Missouri, ... [as] Skilled artisans for this particular task cannot be found in the United States. Berlin-Treptow on the 24 December 1922. / United Workshop for Mosaic and Stained Glass / Puhl and Wagner, Gottfried Heinersdorff.

When Gerdt Wagner abandoned the company to return to Germany in 1937, Paul took full control of the company. In 1939, Ravenna Mosaic returned to St. Louis as a free and independent business and revived its association with the Emil Frei Studios.

The Ravenna Mosaic Company of St. Louis and the National Shrine continued a productive relationship through 1979. The manufacturer



Resurrection



The Redemption Dome

and installer of the mosaics in the Crypt Church, Ravenna was also the installer of the first mosaic in the Great Upper Church: *Christ in Majesty*, designed by John de Rosen. In the ambulatories to the left and right of the north apse are four stained glass windows designed and executed by the Emil Frei Studios of St. Louis. Puhl and Wagner closed its doors in West Berlin in 1969. Ravenna Mosaic of St. Louis closed in 1988. Emil Frei Studios of St. Louis maintains its stained glass business even today.

The “crypt idea” was critical to the construction of the National Shrine, along with the “first” mosaics. Shahan eschewed the restraints of a traditional Gothic crypt populated by a forest of supporting columns with his vision of “a great free open space unbroken by columns” (28 July 1910). He sought a style that combined the order and symmetry of the ancient basilica with the joy and triumph that emanates from Byzantine mosaics; an atmosphere of serenity and light. Never was his plan for the iconography of the National Shrine so clearly articulated, as in his lecture *The Blessed Virgin in the Catacombs*:

When the function of the Christian catacombs had ceased, Christian piety “gathered carefully all the art-traditions concerning the Mother of God, and enshrined them lovingly in enduring mosaic on the walls of her favorite temple. ... Spiritual art, it is the hand-maiden of God. ... And none of its types has done more to give the souls [of the faithful] ... than the Madonna.” ☩