

Sesquicentennial Restoration & Rejuvenation

Eight years ago as we began to prepare for our 150th anniversary, we faced the delicate task of restoring the church to an earlier time while making it comfortable for 21st century liturgy and communicants. Some suggested that we restore the church to how it might have looked in the 1860s. The thought of removing electricity, heat, and plumbing quickly eliminated that idea! We settled on a reference date of 1913; perhaps the church did not have these modern conveniences, but other buildings in Idaho City did. We had to undo many of the alterations that took place between 1920 and 1985. Much of the charm and beauty of the 1913 redecoration was lost during these 65 years due to modernization (central heating, plumbing, and lighting). Everything was painted stark white. The floors were covered in carpeting: an “indoor-outdoor” carpet under the pews and brown shag carpet in the aisle and sanctuary. The lighting was bright and harsh, the fixtures reminiscent of a 1950s school house. The small bathroom was better than the outhouse that previously served our needs, but there was no hot water and the fixtures were in sorry shape. It might appear that much of what we did was just an historical restoration, but that is far from the truth. The project brought the community together to discuss (and argue!) what we would do and how we’d go about it. The community renewed and rejuvenated itself while we renewed and renovated our church.

Financial help from the Diocese of Boise, the Extension Society, and Our Lady of the Rosary Parish—as well as our own fundraising—were critical. Those funds combined with over a thousand hours of volunteer work from almost all of our parishioners made possible the church we now enjoy.

The sanctuary was clearly delineated from the nave of the church using a complementary wallpaper and by elevating the floor one step with new wood. Floor boards were salvaged to repair flooring elsewhere.

The century-and-a-half-old quarter-sawn floors had been painted several times and subsequently carpeted. It took a day and a dozen of us to remove the carpeting and the glue before the floors could be sanded and brought back to life. It’s inspiring to think that more than a century ago, miners with their mail-order brides and children walked these very same boards and many were carried from here to Pioneer Cemetery.

The corpus on the crucifix above the old altar had chips in the plaster, had been splattered with white paint, and had drops of red nail polish to dramatize the wounds of Jesus. All were repaired and repainted. The oil paintings of Mary and Joseph were dirty and one had a tear on its surface; both were restored.

We know from our records that the church was wallpapered in 1913. Inside the walls we found scraps of a green and white paper. The new wallpaper (from England) recaptures that earlier era.

The old sanctuary lamp was repaired, polished, and now flickers safely with an LED bulb.

Many of our most treasured artifacts were given to St. Joseph’s by the Extension Society in 1913. The old altar bears a plaque, still visible at the bottom right corner on the base of the altar, reminding us of its donor. A parishioner lovingly dissembled the altar, sanded it, repainted it, and applied new gold leaf to the trim and lettering. And, of course, she very carefully polished the Society’s brass gift plaque and put it back where it had been for 95 years.

Another parishioner crafted a new ambo and tables for our statuary to match the Society’s then 95 year-old gift. After so many years, the Stations of the Cross were in sorry shape as well. The wood frames were damaged and the pictures (printed in Germany in 1893) were water stained. A Boise artist restored the pictures and a parishioner made new frames from solid Tiger Maple.

The monstrance, now in its niche above the tabernacle, may have been saved from the 1867 fire. It was missing several of its semi-precious stones; the gold plating had worn away and the luna had disappeared. All was restored as you see it today.

The pews were in worse shape than the floors. Many were broken, held together more by layers of paint than by nails and glue. Although it would have been easier and cheaper to replace the pews—indeed many advocated for just that since they are pretty uncomfortable—each pew was disassembled, stripped, sanded, all the nails pulled, new brass screws countersunk, holes plugged, and each pew stained and varnished.

The kneelers were hard and unpadded. Some suggested that they be padded; others argued they should be left as they were. Close examination found nail holes on the bottom; so the kneelers are padded once again. The old communion rail was moved back a bit to make kneeling in the front pew a little more graceful. We now agree that the pews and kneelers aren’t really that uncomfortable after all!

The electrical wiring was dangerous and the light fixtures were anachronisms. The wiring was brought up to code, switches were replaced with push-button reproductions from the chosen year of 1913, and craftsmen in Portland created six chandeliers consistent with the early twentieth century Arts and Crafts style.

The bathroom now features a tin ceiling, a Victorian wash stand, and a sink basin carried back from Shanghai to remind us of Idaho City’s once large Chinese population.

In Idaho City, we are proud to be the 21st century custodians of “Idaho’s First Cathedral” and while we are working to hand over a building to the next generation, we are working even harder to pass along our Faith.

