

SAINT RICHARD OF CHICHESTER PARISH

Jackson, Mississippi

St. Richard Church was dedicated on Palm Sunday, March 25th, 1967. It is significantly the sacred place where the People of God worship. The building itself expresses the Church community. It embodies in its brick and concrete the timelessness of the Church of history, and the vigor of the Church of renewal. The design aims at the disciplined elimination of everything nonessential.

The first thing seen when approaching St. Richard's from afar is the cross atop the lantern dome, which is lit at night. This fourteen foot cross is directly over the center of the altar below.

The prominent bell tower at the street proclaims the sacred purpose of the building, calling out an invitation to all men of good will. The three bells, which are solid bronze and cast in Holland, are pitched at C, C#, and F respectively. Each bell has a name. The first is named John Paul in honor of the two Popes under which the church was planned. The second is named Richard Oliver after Bishop Gerow, and the third is named Joseph Bernard, after Bishop Brunini.

Set back some 75 feet from the street, the building proper is connected by a moat-like forecourt which bridges the gap from the mundane to the sacred. This is a transition space. It is walled, to collect the community, and to help the members of the community collect themselves and their thoughts as they enter the sacred place. A life-size statue of St. Richard, Bishop of Chichester, England, stands on the bridge as a welcoming gesture.

Over the entrance doors is a concrete canopy. The canopy has always been used to designate a very special place. Here it tells us that we are about to enter a significant place. The entrance doors themselves are of dark heavy sand-blasted oak, with solid bronze pulls. These impress upon us the importance of what lies behind them.

The Vestibule

Through Baptism we enter the Church. Through the Baptistry we enter this church. Through Baptism we die with Christ to sin, and rise with him to grace. The dark granite of the huge baptismal font reminds us of the tomb, the death of sin, which we have forsaken. Above the baptismal font is a circular skylight, reminder of the clear sky and the saving grace of life in Christ.

The columns in the four corners of the room support a giant concrete canopy 21 feet square and 24 feet high. In the baptismal font the waters flows eternally as a source of constant rejuvenation, in which we symbolically partake by dipping our hands in the holy water and making the Sign of the Cross as we enter. To one side stands the Paschal Candle, symbol of the Risen Lord. The Candlestick, heroic in size, is specially designed in black painted aluminum.

The door panels to the Eucharist space stand 24 feet high—sentinels at the entrance to a holy place.

The Nave

As we enter the main part of the church – the nave – this single large room has an unusual sense of spaciousness. There is a rare quality of lights and shadows. The pew area is as wide as it is deep and, even though it seats 620, no one is too far away from the sanctuary to participate meaningfully in the action. This is where the community of the faithful express the faith which is their source of unity.

We soon realize that the entirety of this huge space is given sacred character by the canopy of concrete columns, beams, and ceiling. As this overhead structural complex reaches the sanctuary, it bursts upward to the sky creating a dramatic opening of light above the altar.

To further emphasize the symbolic importance of concrete structure, the brick walls are treated as a complete contrast. Whereas the concrete is bold, sharp, and strong, the brick is soft, uneven, and warmly colored. The corners and ends of the brick walls are curved to enhance this effect. Even that concrete in the walls that is not part of the structural system has been heavily sandblasted to expose the aggregate and thus to differentiate this from the basic structural concrete.

There are no windows in the nave. Visibility to the exterior would be a distraction. Instead, skylights above the side aisles bathe the brick walls in natural light. Electrical fixtures in the ceiling complete illumination.

Sanctuary and Altar

The altar, of course, is the undisputed center of attention. Great care has been taken so that this might be the case. Logically, the altar is the center of the liturgical action, the reason for which the church was built. It is made of solid Cornelian granite from Cold Springs, Minnesota, and its design is powerful enough to establish its importance beyond a doubt. Actual dimensions, however, are small enough not to dwarf the priest as he stands behind it. The altar contains the relics of three of the North American martyrs, and of St. Jean Marie Vianney, known as the Cure of the Ars and the patron of parish priests.

This is the center of the worship action, simple and uncluttered. The tabernacle, as is explained below, has been removed to a separate yet special place. The candles are inserted, freestanding in the floor, defining the sacred space of the altar. The cross, also inserted in the floor, is carried on Sundays in procession to that altar before Mass.

Besides the altar, there are two other centers of attention: the pulpit and the celebrant's chair. The significance of these three places is clearly shown by their design and placement. They are the only granite items in the sanctuary proper, and by the strong simplicity of their forms they appear to expand beyond their actual size. The pulpit, or ambo, not only marks an important place, but serves as a shrine for the Bible, the Word of God, from which the whole first half of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Word – takes its name. The celebrant, representing Christ, presides over the assembly and sits appropriately in a place of distinction.

Reredos Wall

The wall of the sanctuary above the altar is called the reredos wall. On it is depicted the cross – not the cross of the crucified Christ, humbled in death, but the glorified cross of the transfigured Christ as He manifests Himself at the end of time, triumphant and almighty. This perspective is entirely in keeping with the emphasis of the early Church. The reredos wall consists of concrete panels alternately sand-blasted lightly and heavily, nine panels of gold leaf, and six pieces of rough oak. The wood is reminiscent of the cross of Christ's first coming; the panels of concrete and gold across the entire width of the church symbolize the extension of the cross' transfiguring grace to embrace all mankind.

Altar of the Blessed Sacrament

The Blessed Sacrament is given a place of special honor. Because the body and blood of Christ in reservation are not an intrinsic part of the action of the Mass, their location to one side avoids any confusion with the appurtenances of the Mass. Nevertheless, as is proper, the sacramental species are given a position of great importance, because in our Catholic tradition they are regarded as containing Christ really present. The altar of reservation, therefore, with the tabernacle, is located on direct line with the main altar and is also made of granite and is designated along the same simple, direct lines. It is toward this that the faithful genuflect on one knee in reverence as they or leave the Church.

A Cry Room – Chapel

Beyond the Blessed Sacrament altar, the east transept, there is a side chapel. There is no altar in the chapel itself but visual contact, both with the tabernacle and with the sanctuary generally, is maintained through a 20 foot wide by 27 foot high wood and clear glass screen. This chapel is used a "cry room" for children during liturgical services. It may also be used for private prayer and meditation throughout the day.

Choir and Organ

The west transept directly opposite the chapel houses the choir and organ. The choir is not in a balcony but is on the same level as the rest of the people, because the members of the choir are not "performers" but participating members of the worshipping community. The organ contains 681 pipes arranged in 15 ranks. The organ console was specially designed to accord with the pews, which were also specially designed. The layout of the pipes – was evolved specifically to harmonize with the design of the entire building a balanced but unsymmetrical disposition of elements within a basically symmetrical and orderly framework.

Restrained Use of Art

St. Richard's use of sacred art is restrained, to say the least. The Madonna shrine stands on the traditional Blessed Mother side of the church, i.e., to the right of the altar. The Madonna and Child statue is an authentic fourteenth-century late Gothic carving from northern France. Carved of a stone called **pietra antiqua** and polychromed (painted), it has been professionally restored. The granite base contains recesses for vigil lights used as expression of personal devotion.

The twelve granite blocks in the walls of the church are identified as consecration crosses. Each block has a cross inscribed on its face, and there is a hole in the top to receive the consecration candle. These candles are lighted at the time the church is formally consecrated and remain in place as testimony to the solemnity of consecration.

The Stations of the Cross, a fixture in almost all Catholic churches, are very modest plain wood crosses in numbered granite slabs set into the floor. The Stations are paraliturgical; that is, although they are related to the public worship of the Church, they are not part of the Mass and are not directly concerned with the sacraments. They more of a "private devotion". Hence the fourteen stations are not given visible prominence by representational plaques, lest this distract attention from the altar and sanctuary.

At the twelfth station, the Crucifixion, along the east interior wall, hangs a thirteenth century crucifix of the Romanesque/Gothic period from Catalonia, Spain. Carved of wood and polychromed, it has been restored to its original colors. Stark and primitive, this piece – together with the Madonna and Child statue – contributes an archaic note to the otherwise modern building.

The Several Sacristies

Behind the reredos wall are three sacristies: a work sacristy for the members of the Catholic Women's Auxiliary, a priests' sacristy for vesting and storing the sacred vestments and vessels, and an Altar Server sacristy. All sacristies have simple plaster walls and oak cabinet-work. Each sacristy has a tall narrow window set high in the wall, which not only admits light but also creates an impression of antiquity.

To the west of the vestibule-baptistry, near the church entrance, is the Bride's room, used especially on the occasion of weddings. Like the sacristies, it is light plaster and dark oak. On the other, the eastern, side of the vestibule is another sacristy, used on Sundays and feast days by the priests and ushers. It is from here that the Celebrant comes forth in procession down the main aisle of the nave toward the sanctuary.

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St. Richard's is rightly considered among the outstanding churches in the country from the point of view of liturgical architecture. It portrays the vigor of the age in which it was built – an age of renewal. One sees here little decoration or ornamentation; the structure doesn't even look especially new. Rather there is a certain air of timelessness. The brick and concrete will actually improve their appearance with age. Thus, in an uncanny, the building is of its time but yet of all time. In one sense it is of now, and in another sense it could be a thousand years old.

