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## A Hand Full of Pieces

William J. Fletcher  
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### Recommended Citation

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# A HAND FULL OF PIECES

THE STORY OF A MOSAIC

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**William J. Fletcher**

**Sacred Heart University  
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## THE ART OF THE MOSAIC

The term "mosaic" is, perhaps, one of the oldest art terms in man's language, characteristic of every people culture-bent. This is not very strange, for its origin and development is steeped in, even derived from the term *Muses*, literally meaning work pertaining to, emanating from the Muses. In such a relationship the mosaic has always been regarded a high art form, an object of reverence, a work of beauty, a treasured possession. It *is* art - an expression skillfully plied and processed by placing small pieces of stone, marble, glass, shell, ceramics, bone, clay and even wood, roughly uniform in size, shape and thickness, called *tesserae* (pieces shaped to be "radiant") on a flat surface that is vertical, horizontal or curved. Over the span of man's art history, between the earliest of the Sumerians and today, the elements, the process, the purpose, the patterns of mosaics have not basically changed. Three things are constant: a rough surface, a *holding* mastic and the tesserae, raw materials out of which pattern and design become the expression of decoration, ornament, beauty.

The oldest example of man's mosaic art is that of ancient Uruk (Iran's Erech); the latest is still on the drafting board of artist or architect. After the Sumerian highly developed technique of this art form (characterized by color, elaborate pattern and intricate design) fell into disfavor, the use of black and white tesserae developed in Greece and Italy. Yet the process never changed and today's usage dates from between the Fourth and Second Centuries, B.C. The grinding and polishing of the materials began at this time and the Island of Pergammon was the center for choice tesserae with Sosos the Master Mosaicist, an artist whose work in frag-

ment can be seen today in the Vatican Museum. Then came Pompeii with its "House of the Fawn" so richly enhanced by its many uses of the mosaic, not least of which is the front entrance with its chained dog warning *CAVE*, reproduced today as an illustration on the title page of every first year Latin grammar. The practical Roman coupled with the imaginative Greek gave the mosaic its final impetus, a momentum that would last through the Christian Renaissance. Geometric motifs would yield to flowers and birds (a break with the "classic" past signaled by the advent of Jesus Christ), floors being added to by apses, chancels and domes. As classical lore and superstitions in gods and goddesses waned, the fullness of Faith in a Triune God, a Redemptive Savior and a loving Madonna, fused with an ethic new, gave birth to the "golden" age of this art. Silver, gold, reddish copper set the backgrounds for the vibrant colors which set forth Creation, Redemption, Resurrection in their full doctrinal implications.

The mosaic had come of age - no longer a means to an end, rather an end in itself - a teaching tool to reveal doctrine, inspire faith, promote devotion. And so came Rome's St. Prudenziana's apse of 400 A.D., Ravenna's St. Vitale of 526 A.D. with its chancel of Justinian and Theodora, Rome's St. Maria Maggiore, Pisa's Cathedral on which Cimabue and Giotto worked at the start of the Fourteenth Century, St. Mark in Venice, St. Peter in Vatican City. As the mosaic grew in popularity, broadened in scope, refined in technique, the Vatican opened a tesserae or smalti workshop which would produce over 3000 shades of stone and glass. With such variant shading, Raphael's paintings found their way onto the walls of St. Peter's as huge mosaic tapestries.

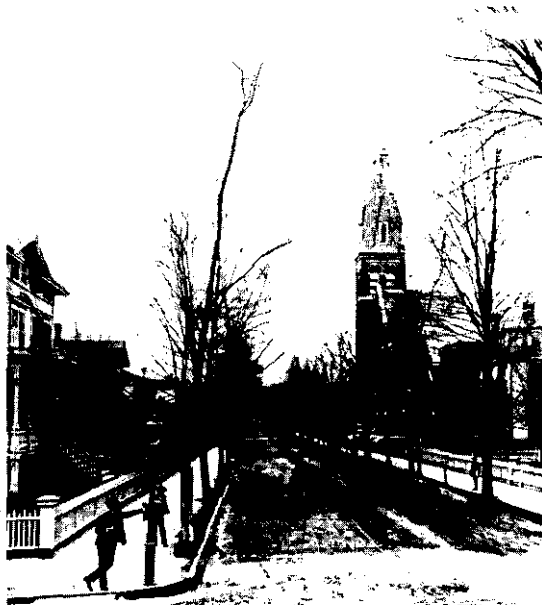
The mosaic has been man's art form as long as he has been artistic. It is a legitimate form in itself and its perfection appears when it is used as such, rather than an imitation of another art form. It is at its peak when it is revered for itself, a thing of beauty, the artist's revelation of himself, his vision, his insight and understanding of truth and simplicity.

## **CHRIST IN BLESSING - ITS HISTORY**

It is within this history of the mosaic that *Christ in Blessing* takes its place. Although it is a work of this century, its design and technique bespeak a tradition not unlike Ravenna's Theodora; Cimabue's Christ or Giotto's use of a myriad of purples, greens and reds in subtle variation for shading and producing a "cloth" realism in drape and fold.

Beuron, well attuned to Art in its full spectrum - ancient traditions and modern techniques - could take the Pope Pius X challenge in his *Moto Proprio* of 1903 to reform church music and art and bring the ancient into the Twentieth Century, bridging the riches of the past with those of the present. Benedictine Monks since the days of St. Benedict himself, charged with "to work is to pray", sought to keep the sacredness of the ancient while working with the contemporary. Architecture, church apperturances, statuary, painting, chalices, crucifixes, vestments would evidence their work *to make all things new*. Beuron and Maria Laach became the centers termed popularly *ARS SACRA*, holy art, breaking with commercial, trite and unartistic church wares so long associated with Barclay Street, New York City.

*Christ in Blessing* is an example of this Ars Sacra, a blend of the old with the new. The majestic Christ, risen in victory over death, clothed as Priest in alb, stole and cope bears witness to his sacerdotal ministry - hands stigmatized with redemptive wounds, the right hand raised in benediction with fingers posed in Oriental symbolism teaching the mystery of the Trinity, the left in icon-fashion expressing oneness with the Father and Son. This Christ is not only the Risen Savior but the Ascended Lord of the Universe, cushioned on clouds, standing against a background of gold-leaf tesserae, fashioned in a motif impacted with Oriental mysticism. Sections are delineated by "squares" formed, interlaced by straight line patterns and swirls in semi-circles. Herein lies the mystery of iconography, a theology of image, a lesson in propaganda, a catechesis in symbolism, faith's language.

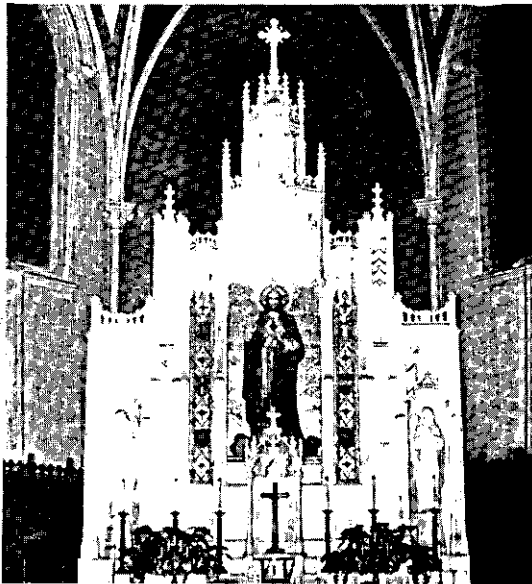


Just as this mosaic now installed in the Sacred Heart University Library fits into the long story and tradition of mosaic lore, so too it has its own personal story - Beuron to Bridgeport, Myrtle to Park Avenue, Parish Church to University Campus. The years between Pius X's desire to reform the Church and John XXIII's full answer to this challenge are spanned by this piece of art. Its beginning came from a pope attuned to modern man and his needs in a church universal; its final home from a bishop charged with the spirit and vision of Vatican II and the role of a university in contemporary man's diocesan life.

Beuron's work was welcomed by those fired with a desire for reform. The spirit, since the days of Pope Leo XIII when he opened the Vatican Archives to the world's scholars, was a return to the ancient, pristine traditions and heritage of the Christian Church. Ars Sacra was in this mood and its popularity developed quickly. In 1913 the Reverend Richard F. Moore became the fourth pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was a scholar by personal bent, an excellent administrator by reputation. The buildings at the junction of Myrtle and Prospect Street, Park Avenue and Prospect were in need of repair. When all but



the church structure had been attended to, he tuned his focus to this final building. A brick exterior fashioned with limestone and wood trim along Gothic lines caused little excitement. Having been dedicated on 4 July 1886, it was typical of the churches built in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. The interior, badly in need of a major repair because of leaks, challenged this pastor known for his sense of history and liturgical lore. He decided to "restore" the church with a full authentic Gothic flavor of vaulted ceilings, a long narrow chancel and nave. As was his practice before any major undertaking, Father Moore prepared for this task with study, patience and perseverance. Two days a week were spent in the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum, studying every



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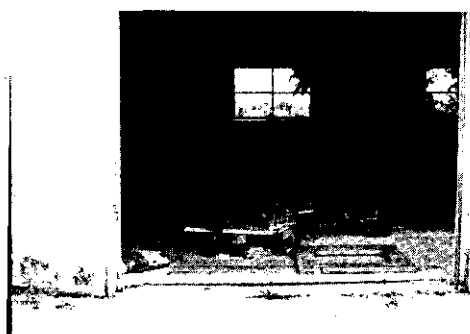
aspect of Gothic design, church decoration and ecclesiastical furnishings. When he had completed his studies it was 1917 and he was ready to restore the interior of Sacred Heart Church. He began by commissioning artists to do the wood work - paneling for the walls, sanctuary and pews in oak richly grained and highly polished. The pulpit would be a gem in design, four major panels of oak, each emblazoned with exquisite carvings of the Theologian-Doctors of the Eastern and Western Church. Then came the marble statuary, all classical in line and form, except Mary who would be sculpted by Beuron in a most distinctive mode. The windows portraying facets of Christ's life and Parables came from Germany and Great Britain, and the master "rose" window depicted King David and St. Cecilia, music's patrons from the Old and New Testament. The marble work would be simple for flooring, imbedded with symbols fashioned in stone richly colored. Lastly, mosaics would be used as inlays in the three altars, serving as antependia or frontals, with *Christ in Blessing* set in the main altar reredos, flanked by two matching panels with motifs of Sacramental symbolism. The restored church was re-dedicated by the Most Reverend John J. Nilan, Bishop of Hartford, on 21



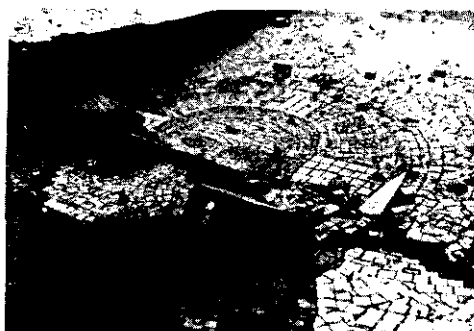
October 1920 and the result of the Moore restoration caused the Editor of *The Catholic Transcript* and historian of the Catholic church in Connecticut, Monsignor Thomas S. Duggan, to write "the work was done with absolute perfection but so skillfully and with unstinting profusion that an ordinary parish church was transformed into one of the really beautiful temples of the Diocese of Hartford."

## RESTORATION AND REINSTALLATION OF CHRIST IN BLESSING

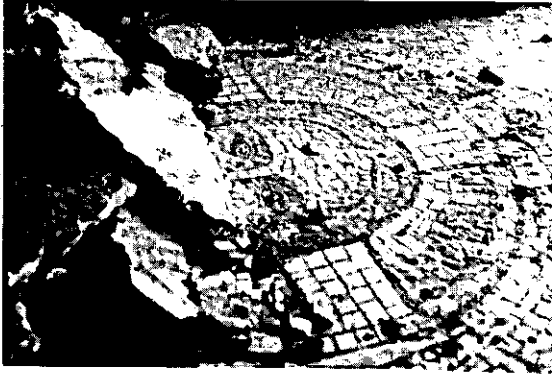
With the closing Mass on Sunday Evening, 26 December 1965, Sacred Heart Church ceased to be. Razing started the following day to make room for the newly designed Route 25 and this caused *The Bridgeport Herald* to carry headlines on 6 February 1966 A CHURCH DIES IN THE NAME OF PROGRESS. The mosaic was dismantled by Placid Beninco, crated and sent to Sacred Heart University for future installation there. Once on Campus it was stored in various places, the last being a garage openly exposed to all the elements of the weather. In the many shiftings and movings at Sacred Heart the crating had been smashed, the mosaic broken, some of the tesserae lost. Then in early July, 1980 the disintegrating mosaic, one of two examples of Beuronese mosaic work in the



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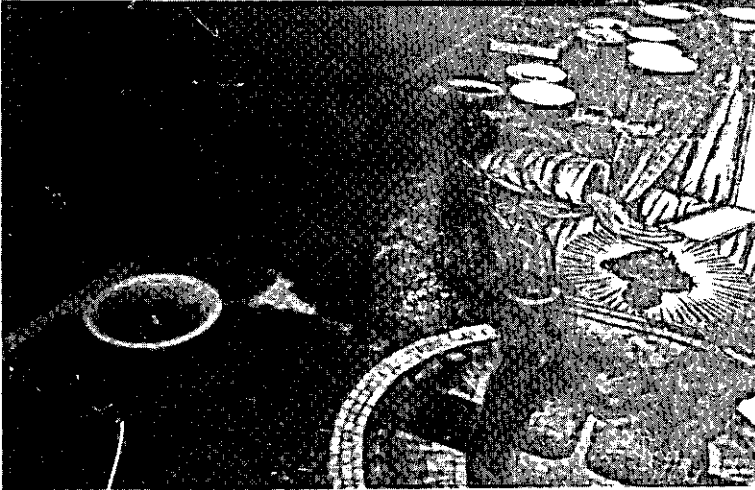
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United States, was rescued from further deterioration. A decision was made by the Administration and the Board of Trustees of the University to salvage what remained and restore the mosaic. A search for a mosaicist to do the work was initiated, and four companies specializing in such work were contacted over the next several months. Each gave the same reply - it could not be restored in the United States, much less at Sacred Heart; it would have to be shipped to Italy because there was no American competent; the time factor would be six to eighteen months. A decision had been made that this restoration would be done at the University as a learning experience for faculty and students. The last commitment was firm but time passed until Easter Week, April, 1981. The man who had removed and crated the mosaic in 1965 was still living in Bridgeport. Placid Beninco had retired from Benny Tile, a company which he founded and although he was not inactive he was not doing large commissions. He was contacted and, since marble is his passion, a love of beauty in his blood and not a little of Michelangelo's *simpatico* in his total being, he graciously agreed to work on the mosaic with the assistance of a member of the University Faculty, William J. Fletcher.

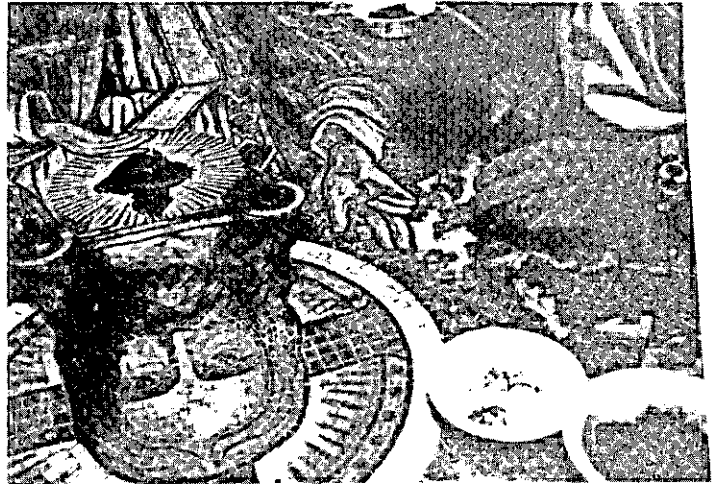


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The fragments of the mosaic were moved once again to a "restoration" room where work would not be interrupted or disturbed. In this final move, two of the four sections into which the mosaic had disintegrated in its various relocations were further damaged: more tesserae loosened, many chipped, the cement bed cracked. However, restoration did begin on Monday 27 April 1981 and the mosaic in its many segments



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was mounted on a sheet of plywood, ten by four feet in size. At last the actual work was underway - five days a week, four to five hours a day. It was rebuilt in two sections so that moving would be facilitated, installation made more secure. The work was tediously painstaking since some of the design had been defaced, particularly in the face, hands, beard, heart and vestments. Tesserae were small, measuring from  $1/64$ " x  $1/4$ " to  $1/2$ " x  $1/2$ " and many had to be sought from old mosaic studios.

The process of replacing and securing the tesserae of the whole design was completed on Friday, 19 June 1981 and it was moved for installation on 14 July to an area in the Sacred Heart University Library since this was the sole wall on the entire Campus large enough to receive it. Total completion, the grouting and moulding, was on 29 July. The journey of *Christ in Blessing* was over and "The Sacred Heart" from Bridgeport's South End was now in place on Bridgeport's Upper Park Avenue, from Parish Church to University Campus, both under the aegis of the Sacred Heart, the former non-extant, the latter vibrant with youthful life. Where insensitivity had spawned neglect, sensitivity appeared to accomplish restoration and reinstatement, and beget reverence for an ancient art form and give back *Christ in Blessing* to his people. Nothing remains to be done but the celebration on Sunday, 18 October 1981, the Feast of St. Luke, Patron of the Arts.



# EPILOGUE

In the story of the mosaic, special mention must be made of four factors that made this possible. First, the Most Reverent Walter W. Curtis, S.T.D., Bishop of Bridgeport and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University, originally gave the mosaic to Sacred Heart University that there might be continuity between Sacred Heart Church which had passed into history and Sacred Heart University just entering history. Secondly, The Board of Trustees of Sacred Heart University as a result of its interest in this project made funds available for the restoration work. Thirdly, by a grant of \$2,800.00 from the Connecticut Humanities Council this mosaic project was able to have a director to supervise the documentation of the restoration in a video presentation, to produce this booklet in text and picture, and to sponsor a series of lectures in areas pertaining to the mosaic. Lastly, the Student Government of Sacred Heart University because of its concern for and interest in the restoration process gave \$1,500.00 to this project. We deeply appreciate these commitments and the generosity so evidenced, and we wish so publicly to express our gratitude. THANK YOU!

## Photographic Legend:

1. Sacred Heart Church 1886
2. Rev. Richard F. Moore
3. Mosaic 1920 Sacred Heart Church
4. - 5. - 6. Mosaic 1980
7. - 8. - 9. Mosaic being restored 1981
10. Mosaic 1981 Sacred Heart Library

*This publication was made possible by a Grant from The Connecticut  
Humanities Council.*