



# ARCHITECTURE

*building the foundations*

# *The Spirit Within the Structure*



ROBERT MIXA AND MICHAEL RAIA

*Recently Robert Mixa, Word on Fire's St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Fellow for Catholic Education, had the opportunity to sit down for a conversation with Michael Raia of Studio io, a liturgical design and consulting firm dedicated to assisting parishes, seminaries, and religious communities with beautification, renovation, and construction. To learn more about Michael's work with Studio io, please visit [www.studioiodesign.com](http://www.studioiodesign.com).*

**ROBERT MIXA:** Michael, you are an architect by training, but something nudged you and you began to earnestly study liturgical theology. What inspired you?

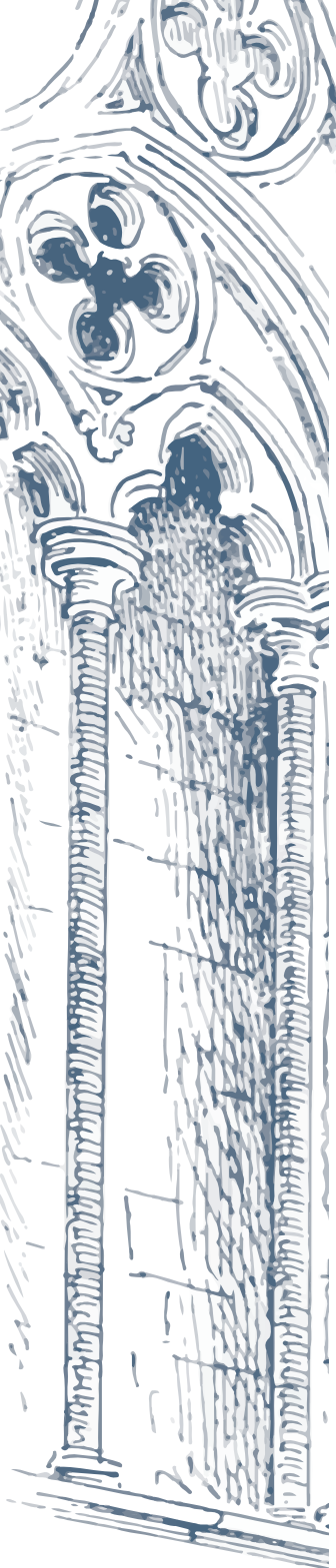
**MICHAEL RAIA:** I really desired to discover the *why* behind the *what*. The work I was being asked to do gradually increased the sense of responsibility I felt to do it right. Instinctively, I could see good work and not-so-good work being done, and it seemed that a certain level of apprehension of the tradition and the theological principles that underlie it—not just copying stylistic elements—was at the heart of a successful renewal of the sacred arts. I had to know more, and to know more, I really needed to study in a place that could outline these concepts faithfully. The MA program at the Liturgical Institute at the University of St. Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary was the only place I found offering a hands-on, rites-based study in sacramental theology that also provided an integral and intensive aesthetics component. As

many may know, Bishop Barron was then rector at Mundelein Seminary, so there was certainly an overlap in approaches to the topics of beauty and fidelity in worship that was very attractive to me and that I later realized was very intentionally outlined by Benedict XVI as “the way of beauty.”

Studying the human side of the theology of beauty alongside the Church's liturgical theology yielded an entirely different perspective that I found to be seamless with past experience in New Evangelization-focused ministry endeavors. *What does the heart long for? What is the purpose of human life? Why do we worship?* We find profound answers to these questions in the best of the Church's traditions in the sacred arts—in an encounter with Christ himself in the sacraments—as opposed to merely approaching the study of liturgy by way of the mechanics or history of worship that might more appropriately be called *liturgiology*.

**RM:** Working at the Liturgical Institute under the tutelage of gifted professors like Dr. Denis McNamara, what are some of the principles that you learned and how do those principles influence your work today?

**MR:** There are really so many, and they all come from the documents and the teachings from which those documents draw. Anyone who listens to the *Liturgy Guys Podcast* that



Dr. McNamara hosts with Director Jesse Weiler and fellow course instructor Chris Carstens of *Adoremus* would know that *ontology* has to be toward the top of the list; it is vital to see the nature of a church building as a principal sign of the Mystical Body of the Church and as a means of making present the heavenly liturgy. Because the function of a church is inseparable from the sacred liturgy, it is critical to understand what liturgy in Catholic teaching is. The nature of our participation in divine worship relies on a sacramental encounter with Jesus Christ and the foretaste of heaven that he offers us—the sacramental economy. Beauty is a reality that can and, in this realm, *must* be spoken about objectively—as the revelation of God’s very being, love himself, or as Pope St. John Paul II wrote of it, the splendor of the Truth—in keeping with a philosophical tradition of great thinkers, from the ancients to Augustine and Aquinas. These are a handful of our guiding principles, but really there are many others to draw upon that we regularly employ in our formation work with clients!

**RM:** Michael, you eventually founded your own liturgical design and consulting firm, Studio io. What inspired you to take this step, and why is it worth investing in good liturgical design?

**MR:** The short answer is that we discerned a calling to explore this path as a result of being drawn to the widespread renewal we see in the Church; we desired to apply our gifts to share in the work Christ is doing in his body the Church. The practical circumstances surrounding that discernment were mostly related to seeing no other way to do the work we felt called to do, and encountering a lot of Catholics asking for the kind of model we felt called to pursue. We are blessed to be witnessing, in real time, a resurgence of beauty in worship and a growing demand for excellence in the sacred arts. Certainly, there is still a lot of work to be done, but we are seeing it in all parts of the country and even in unexpected places. Some of this work is being done in a reactive way—“Just put it back to the way it was before”—that fails to express the beauty articulated in the Second Vatican Council’s documents. This perspective often unintentionally views the misguided implementation of the council’s developments in theology as problematic theology responsible for the destruction of beauty. While it’s clear that, in the wake of the council, there was fairly widespread disregard for traditional beauty in many places, there was also an attempt to rethink the expressions of exciting developments in liturgical theology in sacred art and architecture.

The Church moves slowly, and there is a lot to be desired in the more reactionary approaches, but we now see more clearly and are able to find a more balanced and faithful response in line with the Tradition. All of this is the backdrop for getting it right today. Without a comprehensive understanding of the liturgy and an even-handed assessment of the current state of affairs, it is very difficult to produce sacred art and architecture that is simultaneously faithful to the Tradition and to the work of the council. And yet that is what the Holy Spirit





is doing! In order to find a way forward, we must understand that we can only get so far by trying to copy and put back what came before. There are clear instances where our liturgy has changed. One must carefully consider how these ideas are to be reflected and made manifest in a physical way in what we build. I firmly believe that the degree of success and speed of renewal will be limited by our collective willingness as a Church to set aside polemics and hold two realities of Sacred Tradition in tension at once: we must embrace the established and stable but also living and progressing in the careful and nuanced way the conciliar and postconciliar documents urge.

This thinking must always be operative as the reason *why* we make these changes, not only in the back of our minds but also at the heart of our discussions. This is why Dr. McNamara stresses ontology, and unfortunately it simply is not at the forefront of many discussions at the beginning of projects. A good liturgical designer knows that these conversations are the way to truly implement the ongoing reforms of the Council. This is the way to renew the Church and not just put things visually back as they were before. The Church is now privileged to have a growing number of faithful Catholic professionals who are uncovering the treasures of the faith from before and after the tumultuous times in the middle of the last century. Our firm is merely one offering with particular charisms and approaches that might provide advantages for particular clients. At the end of the day, we can only serve a small percentage of the Church, and we are delighted to work alongside many other colleagues in the vineyard, each according to slightly different callings. For the Body to be healthy, the members have to work together!

**RM:** Please tell us a little more about your team and some of the interesting projects you are working on.

**MR:** The team is outstanding. At the moment we are a roster of five who collaborate closely on a regular basis, although we also work with some wonderfully talented freelance contractors and interns. We are passionate Catholics striving for joy and fidelity who desire to bring beauty and renewal to all that we are blessed to be involved in. We reside in Austin, TX; upstate New Jersey; Denver, CO; and Topeka, KS. We have backgrounds in architecture—my colleagues have master’s degrees in that field—and I have an MA from the Liturgical Institute, where I was able to study sacred architecture more closely. Previously, we practiced in architectural design and project management positions ranging from civic/institutional, religious/nonprofit, and retail/hospitality to residential.

To be sure, we have a certain bias, but we think that all of our client’s projects are interesting! We take the discernment of our projects very seriously. It is important that the projects and clients are a good fit for us and that we are a good fit for them. Naturally, this means we really enjoy what we do, because we are firm believers that the Lord wants to apply our skills and passions to the places where they can bear the most fruit, bearing in mind, of course, that every project has its challenges and every week has ups and downs. To highlight just a couple of our new construction projects, we are working on a new fifteen-hundred-seat Neo-Romanesque style church for St. Mary’s Catholic Center in College Station, TX, which is, by many measures, the largest Catholic college campus ministry. Another project involves a new

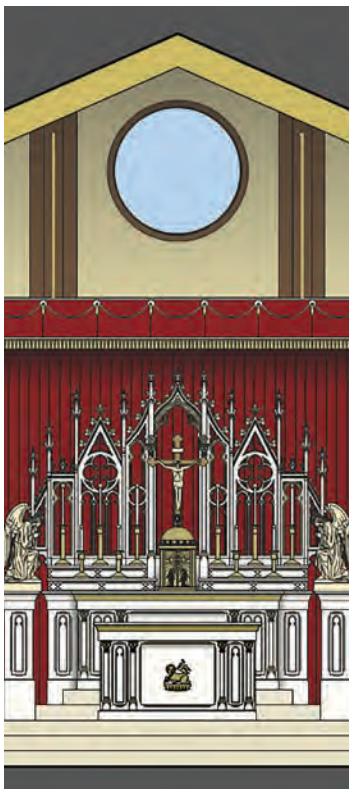
chapel addition for St. John Vianney Seminary in St. Paul, MN, which is quite a bit smaller but is exciting in that it is a new traditional design influenced by the Beaux-Arts history of the Twin Cities and integrated into an existing university campus (University of St. Thomas). The leadership for both projects have set a high bar when it comes to the evangelistic qualities of sacred art and architecture, while also challenging our prudence of stewardship and creativity to produce a unique, authentic, and most importantly, *sacramental* language that serves as a synthesis of both universal and local elements.

**RM:** Tell us about some of the ecclesiastical architects and/or theologians who inspire you. Is there an era of liturgical design that really captivates you?

**MR:** Sacred architecture in America during the late 1800s to the early 1960s really provides us with a lot of inspiration. While the Golden Age is clipped around 1945 for many, we see some gems from the subsequent decades (1950s and 60s) that captured emerging principles of the Liturgical Movement while also demonstrating a reverence for the tradition. This is very difficult to do well and requires a tremendous amount of creativity and knowledge of the liturgy. Because

we receive a high volume of calls to work on buildings that were built after the Second World War (a period that saw major changes in building construction techniques and trends in sacred architecture), we have to be good students of the liturgy in order to identify the elements that are worthy of retaining and those that might need to be carefully altered. Since the body of work from this era that faithfully aligns itself with the tradition is very limited, this can be a tough prospect.

The work of architects like Edward Schulte (featured in part in Dr. McNamara's book *Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy*), who began their careers as masters of tradition and evolved their work in faithful response to changes in stylistic preferences from the population, commands a great deal of respect. We are also inspired by the Deco movement of the 1920s and 1930s and find a number of architects who utilized elements of this successfully in beautiful, traditional sacred architecture. As far as theologians to name just a few, the work of Jean Hanin is outstanding; Joseph Ratzinger's (Benedict XVI's) *The Spirit of the Liturgy* is a frequent go-to in framing questions of renewal and the tie to sacramental aesthetics; Josef Pieper, Virgil Michel, and Fr. Uwe Michael Lang, and one of





my recent favorites, Erik Peterson's book *The Angels and the Liturgy*.

**RM:** Since we are exploring Joy in this issue of *Evangelization & Culture*, could you speak to the joy you derive from the work you do and the joy you hope to impart on those who experience the fruits of your labors?

**MR:** My team and I can't begin to describe the joy and gratitude we experience on a daily basis when we are intentional about this aspect of our spiritual lives. Sure, every job has its dull, trying, and stressful moments, but, on the whole, knowing how many people will experience the fruits of our efforts and will hopefully encounter Christ in a profound way through our designs is simply awe-inspiring. In addition, our work reminds us that renewal is an effort that relies not only on the Lord's timing but also on incremental and collaborative efforts with other members in the Mystical Body of Christ who, likewise, are working in their corners of the vineyard. We are humbled and heartened to be a part of something that is much larger than ourselves. The Holy Spirit is indeed alive and active in the work of liturgical renewal and in the Church's continued transformation of the world through the sacramental beauty of sacred art and architecture. The Father is working to fulfill his promise to restore and reconcile all things to himself in Christ!

