



Tabernacle Tower in St. Theresa's Church.

In the early 1990s, St. Theresa's Parish needed handicap access. As part of the renovation and restoration Fr. Ray Helmick designed and built a new tabernacle and is creating mosaic murals for the pavilion between the church and chapel.

In preparation, he studied the history of tabernacles. Tabernacles, or "reservation places," originated in the Jewish tradition. They served as movable sanctuaries symbolizing the residence of the Divine Presence and the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant. For Christians, a tabernacle is traditionally a sacred place, decorated in a dignified, beautiful style, in which to keep consecrated elements of the Eucharist. Early tabernacles were designed as doves that hung from the ceiling and were lowered down to put hosts in after

Jesuit Theologian and Artist

"You always have time for what you really want to do," said Fr. Raymond Helmick, SJ, when we talked about his talent and artistry with mosaics. Fr. Helmick is a professor of theology at Boston College and served for several years as a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. He is also a multi-talented artist with a particular interest in mosaics. He was recently interviewed on *This Is The Day* on Catholic TV about his role in the renovations at St. Theresa of Avila Parish in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, where his younger brother, Msgr. William M. Helmick, is pastor.

consecration. Over time, tabernacles became more elaborate towers. "For many years, we were accustomed to seeing the tabernacle on the altar but since the restoration of the Eucharist, tabernacles tend to be placed elsewhere. During the renovation process I suggested the idea of a tower structure, which was the custom in pre-Reformation days.

"My design for the new tabernacle as a hexagonal tower is based on two tabernacles in Louvain, Belgium, which were built 40 years apart during the 15th century. I used wood and marble from the communion rail as a base. It is carved from mahogany with gold leaf applied," said Fr. Helmick. The paintings on the tower feature the Passion, the Last Supper, the multiplication of the loaves, the supper at Emmaus, the

miracle at Cana and the adoration of the mystical lamb, based on the painting by Van Eyck. With a smile, Fr. Helmick mentions incorporating parishioners of St. Theresa's into some of his art. The statues mounted on the tiers feature scenes of the Annunciation and the Visitation, the three prefiguring sacrifices mentioned in the First Eucharistic Prayer — Abel, Abraham and Melchizedek. The four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are sitting on the shoulders of prophets of the Old Testament.

In describing his interest in mosaics, Fr. Helmick said, "My inspiration comes from religious art from Europe, the Middle East and around the world. During my travels to Rome, Istanbul and Venice, I learned about the history of mosaics and how they were made.

"For the large (15'x15') walls in



Fr. Ray Helmick, SJ, and his brother, Msgr. William Helmick, pose in front of the 70-page template Fr. Ray created to illustrate the mosaic that is now in place.

the new pavilion, the architect, Tony de Castro, suggested tapestries. I recommended mosaics," Fr. Helmick said. "Since a wheelchair ramp ran along one of them, the healing miracles of Christ were the inspiration." It is estimated that it will take another year to complete all of the 15 panels.

It is often said that Jesuits have many callings and responsibilities. In his life as a Jesuit, recorded as part of the New England Province's Jesuits Oral History project,



Detail from mosaic.

Fr. Helmick mentions that as a student at BC High, architecture was one of his interests. During his 59 years as a Jesuit he has been involved in many academic and theological endeavors. It is nice to see one of his early interests blossom into his artistic talent.



To read more about Fr. Helmick, visit: www.jesuitoralhistory.org

Photos: Judith Sargeant



Artist Fr. Ray Helmick, SJ, working on a mosaic.